ONE OF CLIVE'S HEROES

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THE SUBAHDAR FALLS INTO THE TRAP.

ONE OF CLIVE'S HEROES

A Story of the Fight for India

By

HERBERT STRANG

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Preface

I have not attempted in this story to give a full account of the career of Lord Clive. That has been done by my old friend Mr. Henty in *With Clive in India.* It has always seemed to me that a single book provides too narrow a canvas for the display of a life so full and varied as Clive's; while a story is bound to suffer, structurally and in detail, from the compression of the events of a life-time into so restricted a space. I have therefore chosen two outstanding events in the history of India and of Clive--the capture of Gheria and the Battle of Plassey; and have made them the pivot of a personal story of adventure. The whole action of the present work is

comprised in the years from 1754 to 1757.

But while this book is thus rather a romance with a background of history than an historical biography with an admixture of fiction, the reader may be assured that the information its pages contain is accurate. I have drawn freely upon the standard authorities: Orme's *History*, Ives' *Voyage*, Grose's *Voyage*, the lives of Clive by Malcolm and by Colonel Malleson, and many other works, in particular the monumental volumes, by Mr. S. C. Hill recently published, *Bengal in 1756-7*, which give a very full, careful and clear account of that notable year, with a mass of most useful and interesting documents. The maps of Bengal, Fort William, and Plassey in the present volume are taken from Mr. Hill's work, by kind permission of the Secretary of State for India. I have to thank also Mr. T. P. Marshall, of Newport, for some valuable notes on the history and topography of Market Drayton. For Indian words and names the Hunterian spelling has been adopted in the main.

For several years I myself lived within a stone's throw of the scene of the tragedy of the Black Hole; and though at that time I had no intention of writing a story for boys, I hope that the impressions of Indian life, character, and scenery then gained have helped to create an atmosphere and to give reality to my picture. History is more than a mere record of events; I shall be satisfied if the reader gets from these pages an idea, however imperfect, of the conditions of life in which our empire-builders laboured in India a hundred and fifty years ago.

HERBERT STRANG.

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CHAPTER THE FIRST

In which the Court Leet of Market Drayton entertains Colonel Robert Clive; and our hero makes an acquaintance.

One fine autumn evening, in the year 1754, a country cart jogged eastwards into Market Drayton at the heels of a thickset shaggy-fetlocked and broken-winded cob. The low tilt, worn and ill-fitting, swayed widely with the motion, scarcely avoiding the hats of the two men who sat side by side on the front seat, and who, to any one watching their approach, would have appeared as dark figures in a tottering archway, against a background of crimson sky.

As the vehicle jolted through Shropshire Street, the creakings of its unsteady wheels mingled with a deep humming, as of innumerable bees, proceeding from the heart of the town. Turning the corner by the butchers' bulks into the High Street, the cart came to an abrupt stop. In front, from the corn-market, a large wooden structure in the centre of the street, to the *Talbot Inn*, stretched a dense mass of people, partly townsfolk, as might be discerned by their dress, partly country folk who, having come in from outlying villages to market, had presumably been kept in the town by their curiosity or the fair weather.

"We'n better goo round about, measter," said the driver to the passenger at his side. "Summat's afoot down yander."

"You're a wise man, to be sure. Something's afoot, as you truly say. And being troubled from my youth up with an inquiring nose, I'll e'en step forward and smell out the occasion. Do you bide here, my Jehu, till I come back."

"Why, I will then, measter, but my name binna Jehu. 'Tis plain Tummas."

"You don't say so! Now I come to think of it, it suits you better than Jehu, for the Son of Nimshi drove furiously. Well, Tummas, I will not keep you long; this troublesome nose of mine, I dare say, will soon be satisfied."

By this time he had slipped down from his seat, and was walking towards the throng. Now that he was upon his feet, he showed himself to be more than

common tall, spare, and loose-jointed. His face was lean and swarthy, his eyes black and restless; his well-cut lips even now wore the same smile as when he mischievously misnamed his driver. Though he wore the usual dress of the Englishman of his day--frock, knee-breeches, and buckle-shoes, none of them in their first youth--there was a something outlandish about him, in the bright yellow of his neckcloth and the red feather stuck at a jaunty angle into the riband of his hat; and Tummas, as he looked curiously after his strange passenger, shook his head, and bit the straw in his mouth, and muttered:

"Ay, it binna on'y the nose, 't binna on'y the nose, with his Jehus an' such."

Meanwhile the man strode rapidly along, reached the fringe of the crowd, and appeared to make his way through its mass without difficulty, perhaps by reason of his commanding height, possibly by the aforesaid quaintness of his aspect, and the smile which forbade any one to regard him as an aggressor. He went steadily on until he came opposite to the *Talbot Inn*. At that moment a stillness fell upon the crowd; every voice was hushed; every head was craned towards the open windows of the inn's assembly-room.

[Sidenote: Reminiscences]

Gazing with the rest, the stranger saw a long table glittering under the soft radiance of many candles and surrounded by a numerous company--fat and thin, old and young, red-faced and pale, gentle and simple. At the end farthest from the street one figure stood erect--a short, round, rubicund little man, wearing a gown of rusty black, one thumb stuck into his vest, and a rosy benignity in the glance with which he scanned the table. He threw back his head, cleared his tight throat sonorously, and began, in tones perhaps best described as treacly, to address the seated company, with an intention also towards the larger audience without.

"Now, neebours all, we be trim and cosy in our insides, and 'tis time fur me to say summat. I be proud, that I be, as it falls to me, bein' bailiff o' this town, to ax ya all to drink the good health of our honoured townsman an' guest. I ha' lived hereabout, boy an' man, fur a matter o' fifty year, an' if so be I lived fifty more I couldna be a prouder man than I bin this night. Boy an' man, says I. Ay, I knowed our guest when he were no more'n table high. Well I mind him, that I do, comin' by this very street to school; ay, an' he minds me too, I warrant. I see him now, I do, skippin' along street fresh an' nimble-like, his eyne chock full o' mischief, lookin' round fur to see some poor soul to play a prank on. It do feel strange-like to have him a-sittin' by my elbow to-day. Many's the tale I could tell o' his doin' an' our sufferin'. Why, I mind a poor lump of a prentice as I wunst had, a loon as never could raise a keek: poor soul, he bin underground this many year. Well, as I were sayin', this prentice o' mine were allers bein' baited by the boys o' the grammar-school. I done my best for him, spoke them boys fair an' soft, but bless ya, 'twas no good; they baited him worse'n ever. So one day I used my stick to

um. Next mornin', I was down in my bake-hus, makin' my batch ready fur oven, when, oothout a word o' warnin', up comes my two feet behind, down I goes head fust into my flour barrel, and them young----hem! the clergy be present--them youngsters dancin' round me like forty mad merryandrews at a fair."

A roar of laughter greeted the anecdote.

"Ay, neebours," resumed the bailiff, "we can laugh now, you an' me, but theer's many on ya could tell o your own mishappenin's if ya had a mind to 't. As fur me, I bided my time. One day I cotched the leader o' them boys nigh corn-market, an' I laid him across the badgerin' stone, and walloped him nineteen-twenty--hee! hee! D'ya mind that, General?"

He turned to the guest at his right hand, who sat with but the glimmer of a smile, crumbling one of Bailiff Malkin's rolls on the table-cloth.

"But theer," continued the speaker, "that be nigh twenty year ago, an' the shape o' my strap binna theer now, I warrant. Three skins ha' growed since then--hee! hee! Who'd ha' thought, neebours, as that young limb as plagued our very lives out 'ud ha' bin here to-day, a general, an' a great man, an' a credit to his town an' country? Us all thought as he'd bring his poor feyther's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. An' when I heerd as he'd bin shipped off to the Injies--well, thinks I, that bin the last we'll hear o' Bob Clive. But bless ya! all eggs binna addled. General Clive here--'twere the Injun sun what hatched he, an' binna he, I ax ya, a rare young fightin' cock? Ay, and a good breed too. A hunnerd year ago theer was a Bob Clive as med all our grandfeythers quake in mortal fear, a terrible man o' war was he. They wanted to put 'n into po'try an' the church sarvice.

From Wem and from Wyche
An' from Clive o' the Styche,
Good Lord, deliver us.

That's what they thought o' the Bob Clive o' long ago. Well, this Bob Clive now a-sittin' at my elbow be just as desp'rate a fighter, an' thankful let us all be, neebours, as he does his fightin' wi' the black-faced Injuns an' the black-hearted French, an' not the peaceful bide-at-homes o' Market Drayton."

The little bailiff paused to moisten his lips. From his audience arose feeling murmurs of approval.

"Ya known what General Clive ha' done," he resumed. "'Twas all read out o' prent by the crier in corn-market. An' the grand folks in Lun'on ha' give him a gowd sword, an' he bin hob-a-nob wi' King Jarge hisself. An' us folks o' Market Drayton take it proud, we do, as he be come to see us afore he goes back to his duty. Theer's a' example fur you boys. Theer be limbs o' mischief in Market Drayton yet. Ay, I see tha, 'Lijah Notcutt, a-hangin' on to winder theer. I know who wringed the

neck o' Widder Peplow's turkey. An' I see tha too, 'Zekiel Podmore; I know who broke the handle o' town pump. If I cotch ya at your tricks I'll leather ya fust an' clap ya in the stocks afterwards, sure as my name be Randle Malkin. But as I wan sayin', if ya foller th' example o' General Clive, an' turn yer young sperits into the lawful way--why, mebbe there be gowd swords an' mints o' money somewheers fur ya too. Well now, I bin talkin' long enough, an' to tell ya the truth I be dry as a whistle, so I'll ax ya all to lift yer glasses, neebours, an' drink the good health o' General Clive. So theer!"

[Sidenote: "General Clive!"

As the worthy bailiff concluded his speech, the company primed their glasses, rose, and drank the toast with enthusiasm. Lusty cheers broke from the drier throats outside; caps were waved, rattles whirled, kettles beaten, with a vigour that could not have been exceeded if the general loyalty had been stirred by the presence of King George himself. Only one man in the crowd held his peace. The stranger remained opposite to the window, silent, motionless, looking now into the room, now round upon the throng, with the same smile of whimsical amusement. Only once did his manner change; the smile faded, his lips met in a straight line, and he made a slight rearward movement, seeming at the same moment to lose something of his height. It was when the guest of the evening stood up to reply: a young man, looking somewhat older than his twenty-nine years, his powdered hair crowning a strong face, with keen, deep-set eyes, full lips and masterful chin. He wore a belaced purple coat; a crimson sash crossed his embroidered vest; a diamond flashed upon his finger. Letting his eyes range slowly over the flushed faces of the diners, he waited until the bailiff had waved down the untiring applauders without; then, in a clear voice, began:

"Bailiff Malkin, my old friends----"

But his speech was broken in upon by a sudden commotion in the street. Loud cries of a different tenor arose at various points; the boys who had been hanging upon the window-ledge dropped to the ground; the crowd surged this way and that, and above the mingled clamour sounded a wild and fearful squeal that drew many of the company to their feet and several in alarm to the window. Among these the bailiff, red now with anger, shook his fist at the people and demanded the meaning of the disturbance. A small boy, his eyes round with excitement, piped up:

"An't please yer worship, 'tis a wild Injun come from nowheer an' doin' all manner o' wickedness."

"A wild Injun! Cotch him! Ring the 'larum bell! Put him in the stocks!"

But the bailiff's commands passed unheeded. The people were thronging up the street, elbowing each other, treading on each other's toes, yelling, booing, forgetful of all save the strange coincidence that, on this evening of all others, the

banquet in honour of Clive, the Indian hero, had been interrupted by the sudden appearance of a live Indian in their very midst.

A curious change had come over the demeanour of the stranger who hitherto had been so silent, so detached in manner, so unmoved. He was now to be seen energetically forcing his way towards the outskirts of the crowd, heaving, hurling, his long arms sweeping obstacles aside. His eyes flashed fire upon the yokels scurrying before him, a vitriolic stream of abuse scorched their faces as he bore them down. At length he stopped suddenly, caught a hulking farmer by the shoulder, and with a violent twist and jerk flung him headlong among his fellows. Released from the man's grasp, a small negro boy, his eyes starting, his breast heaving with terror, sprang to the side of his deliverer, who soothingly patted his woolly head, and turned at bay upon the crowd, now again pressing near.

"Back, you boobies!" he shouted. "'Tis my boy! If a man of you follows me, I'll break his head for him."

He turned and, clasping the black boy's hand close in his, strode away towards the waiting cart. The crowd stood in hesitation, daunted by the tall stranger's fierce mien. But one came out from among them, a slim boy of some fifteen years, who had followed at the heels of the stranger and had indeed assisted his progress. The rest, disappointed of their Indian hunt, were now moving back towards the inn; but the boy hastened on. Hearing his quick footsteps the man swung round with a snarl.

"I hope the boy isn't hurt," said the lad quietly. "Can I do anything for you?"

The stranger looked keenly at him; then, recognizing by his mien and voice that this at least was no booby, he smiled; the truculence of his manner vanished, and he said:

"Your question is pat, my excellent friend, and I thank you for your good will. As you perceive, my withers are not wrung." He waved his right hand airily, and the boy noticed that it was covered from wrist to knuckles with what appeared to be a fingerless glove of black velvet. "The boy has taken no harm. 'Hic niger est,' as Horace somewhere hath it; and black spells Indian to your too hasty friends yonder. Scipio is his praenomen, bestowed on him by me to match the cognomen his already by nature--Africanus, to wit. You take me, kind sir? But I detain you; your ears doubtless itch for the eloquence of our condescending friend yonder; without more ado then, good night!"

[Sidenote: A Gloved Hand]

And turning on his heel, waving his gloved hand in salutation, the stranger went his way. The lad watched him wonderingly. For all his shabbiness he appeared a gentleman. His speech was clean cut, his accent pure; yet in his tone, as in his dress, there was something unusual, a touch of the theatrical, strange to

that old sleepy town.

He hoisted the negro into the cart, then mounted to his place beside the driver, and the vehicle rumbled away.

Retracing his steps, the boy once more joined the crowd, and wormed his way through its now silent ranks until he came within sight of the assembly-room. But if he had wished to hear Clive's speech of thanks, he was too late. As he arrived, applause greeted the hero's final words, and he resumed his seat. To the speeches that followed no heed was paid by the populace; words from the vicar and the local attorney had no novelty for them. But they waited, gossiping among themselves, until the festivity was over and the party broke up. More shouts arose as the great man appeared at the inn door. Horses were there in waiting; a hundred hands were ready to hold the stirrup for Clive; but he mounted unassisted and rode off in company with Sir Philip Chetwode, a neighbouring squire, whose guest he was. When the principal figure had gone, the throng rapidly melted away, and soon the street had resumed its normal quiet.

The boy was among the last to quit the scene. Walking slowly down the road, he overtook a bent old man in the smock of a farm labourer, trudging along alone.

"Hey, measter Desmond," said the old man, "I feels for tha, that I do. I seed yer brother theer, eatin' an' drinkin' along wi' the noble general, an' thinks I, 'tis hard on them as ha' to look on, wi' mouths a-waterin' fur the vittles an' drink. But theer, I'd be afeard to set lips to some o' them kickshawses as goes down into the nattlens o' high folk; an', all said an' done, a man canna be more'n full, even so it bin wi' nowt but turmuts an' Cheshire cheese. Well, sir, 'tis fine to be a nelder son, that's true, an' dunna ya take on about it. You bin on'y a lad, after all, pardon my bold way o' speakin', an' mebbe when you come to man's estate, why, there'll be a knife an' fork fur you too, though I doubt we'll never see General Clive in these parts no moore. Here be my turnin'; good night to ya, sir."

"Good-night, Dickon."

[Sidenote: To Cheswardine]

And Desmond Burke passed on alone, out of the silent town, into the now darkening road that led to his home towards Cheswardine.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

In which our hero overhears a conversation; and, meeting with the expected, is none the less surprised and offended.

Desmond's pace became slower when, having crossed the valley, he began the long ascent that led past the site of Tyrley Castle. But when he again reached a stretch of level road he stepped out more briskly, for the darkness of the autumn night was moment by moment contracting the horizon, and he had still several miles to go on the unlighted road. Even as the thought of his dark walk crossed his mind he caught sight of the one light that served as a never-failing beacon to night travellers along that highway. It came from the windows of a wayside inn, a common place of call for farmers wending to or from Drayton market, and one whose curious sign Desmond had many times studied with a small boy's interest. The inn was named the *Four Alls*: its sign a crude painting of a table and four seated figures--a king, a parson, a soldier, and a farmer. Beneath the group, in a rough scrawl, were the words--

> Rule all: Pray all:
> Fight all: Pay all.

As Desmond drew nearer to the inn, there came to him along the silent road the sound of singing. This was somewhat unusual at such an hour, for folk went early to bed, and the inn was too far from the town to have attracted waifs and strays from the crowd. What was still more unusual, the tones were not the rough, forced, vagrant tones of tipsy farmers; it was a single voice, light, musical, and true. Desmond's curiosity was nicked, and he hastened his step, guessing from the clearness of the sound that the windows were open and the singer in full view.

The singing ceased abruptly just as he reached the inn. But the windows stood indeed wide open, and from the safe darkness of the road he could see clearly, by the light of four candles on the high mantelshelf, the whole interior of the inn parlour. It held four persons. One lay back in a chair near the fire, his legs outstretched, his chin on his breast, his open lips shaking as he snored. It was Tummas Biles the tranter, who had driven a tall stranger from Chester to the present spot, and whose indignation at being miscalled Jehu had only been appeased by a quart of strong ale. On the other side of the fireplace, curled up on a settle, and also asleep, lay the black boy Scipio Africanus. Desmond noted these two figures in passing; his gaze fastened upon the remaining two, who sat at a corner of the table, a tankard in front of each.

One of the two was Job Grinsell, landlord of the inn, a man with a red

nose, loose mouth, and shifty eyes--not a pleasant fellow to look at, and regarded vaguely as a bad character. He had once been head gamekeeper to Sir Willoughby Stokes, the squire, whose service he had left suddenly and in manifest disgrace. His companion was the stranger, the negro boy's master, the man whose odd appearance and manner of talk had already set Desmond's curiosity abuzzing. It was clear that he must be the singer, for Job Grinsell had a voice like a saw, and Tummas Biles knew no music save the squeak of his cart-wheels. It surprised Desmond to find the stranger already on the most friendly, to all appearance indeed confidential, terms with the landlord.

"Hale, did you say?" he heard Grinsell ask. "Ay, hale as you an' me, an' like to last another twenty year, rot him."

"But the gout takes him, you said--nodosa podagra, as my friend Ovid would say?"

"Ay, but I've knowed a man live forty year win the gout. And he dunna believe in doctor's dosin'; he goes to Buxton to drink the weeters when he bin madded wi' the pain, an' comes back sound fur six month."

"Restored to his dear neighbours and friends--caris propinquis----"

"Hang me, but I wish you'd speak plain English an' not pepper yer talk win outlandish jabber."

"Patience, Job; why, man, you belie your name. Come, you must humour an old friend; that's what comes of education, you see; my head is stuffed with odds and ends that annoy my friends, while you can't read, nor write, nor cipher beyond keeping your score. Lucky Job!"

Desmond turned away. The two men's conversation was none of his business; and he suspected from the stranger's manner that he had been drinking freely. He had stepped barely a dozen paces when he heard the voice again break into song. He halted and wheeled about; the tune was catching, and now he distinguished some of the words--

Says Billy Morris, Masulipatam,
To Governor Pitt: "D'ye know who I am.
D'ye know who I am, I AM, I AM?
Sir William Norris, Masulipatam."

Says Governor Pitt, Fort George Madras;
"I know what you are----"

Again the song broke off; the singer addressed a question to Grinsell. Desmond waited a moment; he felt an odd eagerness to know what Governor Pitt was;

but hearing now only the drone of talking, he once more turned his face homewards. His curiosity was livelier than ever as to the identity of this newcomer, who addressed the landlord as he might his own familiar friend. And what had the stranger to do with Sir Willoughby Stokes? For it was Sir Willoughby that suffered from the gout; he it was that went every autumn and spring to Buxton; he was away at this present time, but would shortly return to receive his Michaelmas rents. The stranger had not the air of a husbandman; but there was a vacant farm on the estate; perhaps he had come to offer himself as a tenant. And why did he wear that half-glove upon his right hand? Finger-stalls, wrist-straps, even mittens were common enough, useful, and necessary at times; but the stranger's glove was not a mitten, and it had no fellow for the left hand. Perhaps, thought Desmond, it was a freak of the wearer's, like his red feather and his vivid neck-cloth. Desmond, as he walked on, found himself hoping that the visitor at the *Four Alls* would remain for a day or two.

After passing through the sleeping hamlet of Woods-eaves, he struck into a road on his left hand. Twenty minutes' steady plodding uphill brought him in sight of his home, a large, ancient, rambling grange house lying back from the road. It was now nearly ten o'clock, an hour when the household was usually abed; but the door of Wilcote Grange stood open, and a guarded candle in the hall threw a faint yellow light upon the path. The gravel crunched under Desmond's boots, and, as if summoned by the sound, a tall figure crossed the hall and stood in the entrance. At the sight Desmond's mouth set hard; his hands clenched, his breath came more quickly as he went forward.

"Where have you been, sirrah?" were the angry words that greeted him.

"Into the town, sir."

He had perforce to halt, the doorway being barred by the man's broad form.

"Into the town! You defy me, do you? Did I not bid you remain at home and make up the stock-book?"

"I did that before I left."

"You did, did you? I lay my life 'tis ill done. What did you in the town at this time o' night?"

"I went to see General Clive."

"Indeed! You! Hang me, what's Clive to you? Was you invited to the regale? You was one of that stinking crowd, I suppose, that bawled in the street. You go and herd with knaves and yokels, do you? and bring shame upon me, and set the countryside a-chattering of Richard Burke and his idle young oaf of a brother! By gad, sir, I'll whip you for this; I'll give you something to remember General Clive by!"

He caught up a riding-whip that stood in the angle of the doorway, and took Desmond by the shoulder. The boy did not flinch.

"Whip me if you must," he said quietly, "but don't you think we'd better go outside?"

The elder, with an imprecation, thrust Desmond into the open, hauled him some distance down the path, and then beat him heavily about the shoulders. He stood a foot higher, his arm was strong, his grip firm as a vice; resistance would have been vain; but Desmond knew better than to resist. He bent to the cruel blows without a wince or a murmur. Only, his face was very pale when, the bully's arm being tired and his breath spent, he was flung away and permitted to stagger to the house. He crawled painfully up the wainscoted staircase and into the dark corridor leading to his bedroom. Halfway down this he paused, felt with his hand along the wall, and discovering by this means that a door was ajar, stood listening.

"Is that you, Desmond?" said a low voice within.

"Yes, mother," he replied, commanding his voice, and quietly entering. "I hoped you were asleep."

"I could not sleep until you came in, dear. I heard Dick's voice. What is the matter? Your hand is trembling, Desmond."

"Nothing, mother, as usual."

A mother's ears are quick; and Mrs. Burke detected the quiver that Desmond tried to still. She tightened her clasp on his hot hand.

"Did he strike you, dear?"

"It was nothing, mother. I am used to that."

"My poor boy! But what angered him? Why do you offend your brother?"

"Offend him!" exclaimed the boy passionately, but still in a low tone. "Everything I do offends him. I went to see General Clive; I wished to; that is enough for Dick. Mother, I am sick of it all."

"Never mind, dear. A little patience. Dick doesn't understand you. You should humour him, Desmond."

"Haven't I tried, mother? Haven't I? But what is the use? He treats me worse than any carter on the farm. I drudge for him, and he bullies me, miscalls me before the men, thrashes me--oh, mother! I can't endure it any longer. Let me go away, anywhere; anything would be better than this!"

Desmond was quivering with pain and indignation; only with difficulty did he keep back the tears.

"Hush, Desmond!" said his mother. "Dick will hear you. You are tired out, dear boy; go to bed; things will look brighter in the morning. Only have patience. Good-night, my son."

Desmond kissed his mother and went to his room. But it was long before he slept. His bruised body found no comfort; his head throbbed; his soul was filled with resentment and the passionate longing for release. His life had not been

very happy. He barely remembered his father--a big, keen-eyed, loud-voiced old man--who died when his younger son was four years old. Richard Burke had run away from his Irish home to sea. He served on Admiral Rooke's flagship at the battle of La Hogue, and, rising in the navy to the rank of warrant-officer, bought a ship with the savings of twenty years and fitted it out for unauthorized trade with the East Indies. His daring, skill, and success attracted the attention of the officers of the Company. He was invited to enter the Company's service. As captain of an Indiaman he sailed backwards and forwards for ten years; then at the age of fifty retired with a considerable fortune and married the daughter of a Shropshire farmer. The death of his wife's relatives led him to settle on the farm their family had tenanted for generations, and it was at Wilcote Grange that his three children were born.

Fifteen years separated the elder son from the younger; between them came a daughter, who married early and left the neighbourhood. Four years after Desmond's birth the old man died, leaving the boy to the guardianship of his brother.

There lay the seed of trouble. No brothers could have been more unlike than the two sons of Captain Burke. Richard was made on a large and powerful scale; he was hard-working, methodical, grasping, wholly unimaginative, and in temper violent and domineering. Slighter and less robust, though not less healthy, Desmond was a boy of vivid imagination, high-strung, high-spirited, his feelings easily moved, his pride easily wounded. His brother was too dull and stolid to understand him, taking for deliberate malice what was but boyish mischief, and regarding him as sullen when he was only dreamily thoughtful.

As a young boy Desmond kept as much as possible out of his brother's way. But as he grew older he came more directly under Richard's control, with the result that they were now in a constant state of feud. Their mother, a woman of sweet temper but weak will, favoured her younger son in secret; she learnt by experience that open intervention on his behalf did more harm than good.

Desmond had two habits which especially moved his brother to anger. He was fond of roaming the country alone for hours together; he was fond of reading. To Richard each was a waste of time. He never opened a book, save a manual of husbandry, or a ready reckoner; he could conceive of no reason for walking, unless it were the business of the farm. Nothing irritated him more than to see Desmond stretched at length with his nose in Mr. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or a volume of Hakluyt's *Voyages*, or perhaps Mr. Oldys's *Life of Sir Walter Raleigh*. And as he himself never dreamed by day or by night, there was no chance of his divining the fact that Desmond, on those long solitary walks of his, was engaged chiefly in dreaming, not idly, for in his dreams he was always the centre of activity, greedy for doing.

These day-dreams constituted almost the sole joy of Desmond's life. When he was quite a little fellow he would sprawl on the bank near Tyrley Castle and weave romances about the Norman barons whose home it had been--romances in which he bore a strenuous part. He knew every interesting spot in the neighbourhood: Salisbury Hill, where the Yorkist leader pitched his camp before the battle of Blore Heath; Audley Brow, where Audley the Lancastrian lay watching his foe; above all Styche Hall, whence a former Clive had ridden forth to battle against the king, and where his namesake, the present Robert Clive, had been born. He imagined himself each of those bold warriors in turn, and saw himself, now a knight in mail, now a gay cavalier of Rupert's, now a bewigged Georgian gentleman in frock and pantaloons, but always with sword in hand.

No name sang a merrier tune in Desmond's imagination than the name of Robert Clive. Three years before, when he was imbibing Latin, Greek, and Hebrew under Mr. Burslem at the grammar school on the hill, the amazing news came one day that Bob Clive, the wild boy who had terrorized the tradespeople, plagued his master, led the school in tremendous fights with the town boys, and suffered more birchings than any scholar of his time--Bob Clive, the scapegrace who had been packed off to India as a last resource, had turned out, as his father said, "not such a booby after all,"--had indeed proved himself to be a military genius. How Desmond thrilled when the old schoolmaster read out the glorious news of Clive's defence of Arcot with a handful of men against an overwhelming host! How he glowed when the schoolroom rang with the cheers of the boys, and when, a half-holiday being granted, he rushed forth with the rest to do battle in the churchyard with the town boys, and helped to lick them thoroughly in honour of Clive!

From that moment there was for Desmond but one man in the world, and that man was Robert Clive. In the twinkling of an eye he became the devoutest of hero-worshippers. He coaxed Mr. Burslem to let him occupy Clive's old desk, and with his fists maintained the privilege against all comers. The initials "R.C." roughly cut in the oak never lost their fascination for him. He walked out day after day to Styche Hall, two miles away, and pleased himself with the thought that his feet trod the very spots once trodden by Bob Clive. Not an inch of the route from Hall to school--the meadow-path into Longslow, the lane from Longslow to Shropshire Street, Little Street, Church Street, the churchyard--was unknown to him: Bob Clive had known them all. He feasted on the oft-told stories of Clive's boyish escapades: how he had bundled a watchman into the bulks and made him prisoner there by closing down and fastening the shutters; how he had thrown himself across the current of a torrential gutter to divert the stream into the cellar shop of a tradesman who had offended him; above all, that feat of his when, ascending the spiral turret-stair of the church, he had lowered himself down from the parapet, and, astride upon a gargoyle, had worked his way along it until

he could secure a stone that lay in its mouth, the perilous and dizzy adventure watched by a breathless throng in the churchyard below. The Bob Clive who had done these things was now doing greater deeds in India; and Desmond Burke sat day after day at his desk, gazing at the entrancing "R.C." and doing over again in his own person the exploits of which all Market Drayton was proud, and he the proudest.

But at the age of fourteen his brother took him from school, though Mr. Burslem had pleaded that he might remain longer and afterwards proceed to the university. He was set to do odd jobs about the farm. To farming itself he had no objection; he was fond of animals and would willingly have spent his life with them. But he did object to drudging for a hard and inconsiderate taskmaster such as his brother was, and the work he was compelled to do became loathsome to him, and bred a spirit of discontent and rebellion. The further news of Clive's exploits in India, coming at long intervals, set wild notions beating in Desmond's head, and made him long passionately for a change. At times he thought of running away: his father had run away and carved out a successful career, why should not he do the same? But he had never quite made up his mind to cut the knot.

Meanwhile it became known in Market Drayton that Clive had returned to England. Rumour credited him with fabulous wealth. It was said that he drove through London in a gold coach, and outshone the King himself in the splendour of his attire. No report was too highly coloured to find easy credence among the simple country folk. Clive was indeed rich: he had a taste for ornate dress, and though neither so wealthy nor so gaily apparelled as rumour said, he was for a season the lion of London society. The directors of the East India Company toasted him as "General" Clive, and presented him with a jewelled sword as a token of their sense of his services on the Coromandel coast. No one suspected at the time that his work was of more than local importance and would have more far-reaching consequences than the success of a trading company. Clive had, in fact, without knowing it, laid the foundations of a vast empire.

At intervals during two years scraps of news about Clive filtered through to his birthplace. His father had left the neighbourhood, and Styche Hall was now in the hands of a stranger, so that Desmond hardly dared to hope that he would have an opportunity of seeing his idol. But, information having reached the court of directors that all was not going well in India, their eyes turned at once to Clive as the man to set things right. They requested him to return to India as Governor of Fort St. David, and, since a good deal of the trouble was caused by quarrels as to precedence between the King's and the Company's officers, they strengthened his hands by obtaining for him a lieutenant-colonel's commission from King George. Clive was nothing loth to take up his work again. He had been somewhat extravagant since his arrival in England; great holes had been

made in the fortune he had brought back; and he was still a young man, full of energy and ambition. What was Desmond's ecstasy, then, to learn that his hero, on the eve of his departure, had accepted an invitation to the town of his birth, there to be entertained by the court leet. From the bailiff and the steward of the manor down to the javelin men and the ale-taster, official Market Drayton was all agog to do him honour. Desmond looked forward eagerly to this red-letter day. His brother, as a yeoman of standing, was invited to the banquet, and it seemed to Desmond that Richard took a delight in taunting him, throwing cold water on his young enthusiasm, ironically commenting on the mistake some one had made in not including him among the guests. His crowning stroke of cruelty was to forbid the boy to leave the house on the great evening, so that he might not even obtain a glimpse of Clive. But this was too much: Desmond for the first time deliberately defied his guardian, and though he suffered the inevitable penalty, he had seen and heard his hero, and was content.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

In which Mr. Marmaduke Diggle talks of the Golden East; and our hero interrupts an interview, and dreams dreams.

Sore from his flogging, Desmond, when he slept at last, slept heavily. Richard Burke was a stickler for early rising, and admitted no excuses. When his brother did not appear at the usual hour Richard went to his room, and, smiting with his rough hand the boy's bruised shoulders, startled him to wakefulness and pain.

"Now, slug-a-bed," he said, "you have ten minutes for your breakfast, then you will foot it to the Hall and see whether Sir Willoughby has returned or is expected."

Turning on his heel he went out to harry his labourers.

Desmond, when he came downstairs, felt too sick to eat. He gulped a pitcher of milk, then set off for his two-mile walk to the Hall. He was glad of the errand. Sir Willoughby Stokes, the lord of the manor, was an old gentleman of near seventy years, a good landlord, a persistent Jacobite, and a confirmed bachelor. By nature genial, he was subject to periodical attacks of the gout, which made him terrible. At these times he betook himself to Buxton, or Bath, or some other spa,

and so timed his return that he was always good-tempered on rent-day, much to the relief of his tenants. He disliked Richard Burke as a man as much as he admired him as a tenant; but he had taken a fancy to Desmond, lent him books from his library, took him out shooting when the weather and Richard permitted, and played chess with him sometimes of a rainy afternoon. His housekeeper said that Master Desmond was the only human being whose presence the squire could endure when the gout was on him. In short, Sir Willoughby and Desmond were very good friends.

Desmond had almost reached the gate of the Hall when, at a sudden turn of the road, he came upon a man seated upon a low hillock by the roadside, idly swishing at the long ripe grass with a cane. At the first glance Desmond noticed the strangely-clad right hand of his overnight acquaintance, the shabby clothes, the red feather, the flaming neckcloth. The man looked up at his approach; the winning smile settled upon his swarthy face, which daylight now revealed as seamed and scarred; and, without stirring from his seat or desisting from his occupation, he looked in the boy's face and said softly:

"You are early afoot, like the son of Anchises, my young friend. If I mistake not, when Aeneas met the son of Evander they joined their right hands. We have met--let us also join hands and bid each other a very good morning."

Desmond shook hands; he did not know what to make of this remarkable fellow who must always be quoting from his school-books; but there was no harm in shaking hands. He could not in politeness ask the question that rose to his lips--why the stranger wore a mitten on one hand; and if the man observed his curiosity he let it pass.

"You are on business bent, I wot," continued the stranger. "Not for the world would I delay you. But since the hand-clasp is but a part of the ceremony of introduction, might we not complete it by exchanging names?"

"My name is Desmond Burke," said the boy.

"A good name, a pleasant name, a name that I know." Desmond was conscious that the man was looking keenly at him. "There is a gentleman of the same name--I chanced to meet him in London--cultivating literature in the Temple; his praenomen, I bethink me, is Edmund. And I bethink me, too, that in the course of my peregrinations on this planet I have more than once heard the name of one Captain Richard Burke, a notable seaman, in the service of our great Company. I repeat, my young friend, your name is a good one; may you live to add lustre to it!"

"Captain Burke was my father."

"My prophetic soul!" exclaimed the stranger. "But surely you are somewhat late in following the craft paternal; you do not learn seamanship in this sylvan sphere?"

"True," responded Desmond with a smile. "My father turned farmer; he died when I was a little fellow, and I live with my mother. But you will excuse me, sir; I have an errand to the Hall beyond us there."

"I am rebuked. 'Nam garrulus idem est,' as our friend Horace would say. Yet one moment. Ere we part let us complete our interrupted ceremony. Marmaduke Diggle, sir--plain Marmaduke Diggle, at your service."

He swept off his hat with a smile. But as soon as Desmond had passed on the smile faded. Marmaduke Diggle's mouth became hard, and he looked after the retreating form with a gaze in which curiosity, suspicion, and dislike were blended.

He was still seated by the roadside when Desmond returned some minutes later.

"A pleasant surprise, Mr. Burke," he said. "Your business is most briefly, and let us hope happily, despatched."

"Briefly, at any rate. I only went up to the Hall to see if the Squire was returned; it is near rent-day, and he is not usually so late in returning."

"Ah, your squires!" said Diggle with a sigh. "A fine thing to have lands--oliveyards and vineyards, as the Scripture saith.--You are returning? The Squire is not at home? Permit me to accompany you some steps on your road.--Yes, it is a fine thing to be a landlord. It is a state of life much to be envied by poor landless men like me. I confess I am poor--none the pleasanter because 'tis my own fault. You behold in me, Mr. Burke, one of the luckless. I sought fame and fortune years ago in the fabulous East Indies----"

"The Indies, sir?"

"You are interested? In me also, when I was your age, the name stirred my blood and haunted my imagination. Yes, 'tis nigh ten years since I first sailed from these shores for the marvellous East. 'Multum et terris jactatus et alto.' Twice have I made my fortune--got me enough of the wealth of Ormus and of Ind to buy up half your county. Twice, alas! has an unkind Fate robbed me of my all! But, as I said, 'tis my own fault. 'Nemo contentus,' sir--you know the passage? I was not satisfied: I must have a little more; and yet a little more. I put my wealth forth in hazardous enterprises--presto! it is swept away. But I was born, sir, after all, under a merry star. Nothing discourages me. After a brief sojourn for recuperation in this salubrious spot I shall return; and this time, mark you, I shall run no risks. Five years to make my fortune; then I shall come home, content with a round ten lakhs."

"What is a lakh?"

"Ah, I forgot, you are not acquainted with these phrases of the Orient. A lakh, my friend, is a hundred thousand rupees, say twelve thousand pounds. And I warrant you I will not squander it as a certain gentleman we know squandered

his."

"You mean General Clive?"

"Colonel Clive, my friend. Yes, I say Colonel Clive has squandered his fortune. Why, he came home with thirty lakhs at the least: and what does he do? He must ruffle it in purple and fine linen, and feed the fat in royal entertainments; then, forsooth, he stands for a seat in Parliament, pours out his gold like water--to what end? A petition is presented against his return: the House holds an inquiry; and the end of the sorry farce is, that Mr. Robert Clive's services are dispensed with. When I think of the good money he has wasted---- But then, sir, I am no politician. Colonel Clive and I are two ruined men; 'tis a somewhat strange coincidence that he and I are almost of an age, and that we both, before many weeks are past, shall be crossing the ocean once more to retrieve our fallen fortunes."

Walking side by side during this conversation they had now come into the road leading past Desmond's home. In the distance, approaching them, appeared a post-chaise, drawn by four galloping horses. The sight broke the thread of the conversation.

"'Tis the Squire at last!" cried Desmond. "Sure he must have put up at Newcastle overnight."

But that he was intently watching the rapid progress of the chaise, he might have noticed a curious change of expression on his companion's face. The smile faded, the lips became set with a kind of grim determination. But Diggle's pleasant tone had not altered when he said:

"Our ways part here, my friend--for the present. I doubt not we shall meet again; and if you care to hear of my adventures by field and flood--why, 'I will a round unvarnished tale deliver,' as the Moor of Venice says in the play. For the present, then, farewell!"

He turned down a leafy lane, and had disappeared from view before the chaise reached the spot. As it ran by, its only occupant, a big, red-faced, white-wigged old gentleman, caught sight of the boy and hailed him in a rich, jolly voice.

"Ha, Desmond! Home again, you see! Scotched the enemy once more! Come and see me!"

The chaise was past before Desmond could reply. He watched it until it vanished from sight; then, feeling somewhat cheered, went on to report to his brother that the Squire had at last returned.

He felt no little curiosity about his new acquaintance. What had brought him to so retired a spot as Market Drayton? He could have no friends in the neighbourhood, or he would surely not have chosen for his lodging a place of ill repute like the *Four Alls*. Yet he had seemed to have some acquaintance with Grinsell the innkeeper. He did not answer to Desmond's idea of an adventurer. He was not rough of tongue or boisterous in manner; his accent, indeed, was refined;

his speech somewhat studied, and, to judge by his allusions and his Latin, he had some share of polite learning. Desmond was puzzled to fit these apparent incongruities, and looked forward with interest to further meetings with Marmaduke Diggle.

During the next few days they met more than once. It was always late in the evening, always in quiet places, and Diggle was always alone. Apparently he desired to make no acquaintances. The gossips of the neighbourhood seized upon the presence of a stranger at the *Four Alls*, but they caught the barest glimpses of him; Grinsell was as a stone wall in unresponsiveness to their inquiries; and the black boy, if perchance a countryman met him on the road and questioned him, shook his head and made meaningless noises in his throat, and the countryman would assure his cronies that the boy was as dumb as a platter.

But whenever Desmond encountered the stranger, strolling by himself in the fields or some quiet lane, Diggle always seemed pleased to see him, and talked to him with the same ease and freedom, ever ready with a tag from his schoolbooks. Desmond did not like his Latin, but he found compensation in the traveller's tales of which Diggle had an inexhaustible store--tales of shipwreck and mutiny, of wild animals and wild men, of Dutch traders and Portuguese adventurers, of Indian nawabs and French buccaneers. Above all was Desmond interested in stories of India: he heard of the immense wealth of the Indian princes; the rivalries of the English, French, and Dutch trading companies; the keen struggle between France and England for the preponderating influence with the natives. Desmond was eager to hear of Clive's doings; but he found Diggle, for an Englishman who had been in India, strangely ignorant of Clive's career; he seemed impatient of Clive's name, and was always more ready to talk of his French rivals, Dupleix and Bussy. The boy was impressed by the mystery, the colour, the romance of the East; and after these talks with Diggle he went home with his mind afire, and dreamed of elephants and tigers, treasures of gold and diamonds, and fierce battles in which English, French, and Indians weltered in seas of blood.

One morning Desmond set out for a long walk in the direction of Newport. It was holiday on the farm; Richard Burke allowed his men a day off once every half year when he paid his rent. They would almost rather not have had it, for he made himself particularly unpleasant both before and after. On this morning he had got up in a bad temper, and managed to find half a dozen occasions for grumbling at Desmond before breakfast, so that the boy was glad to get away and walk off his resentment and soreness of heart.

As he passed the end of the lane leading towards the Hall, he saw two men in conversation some distance down it. One was on horseback, the other on foot. At a second glance he saw with surprise that the mounted man was his brother, the other Diggle. A well-filled money-bag hung at Richard Burke's saddle-bow;

he was on his way to the Hall to pay his rent. His back was towards Desmond; but, as the latter paused, Richard threw a rapid glance over his shoulder, and with a word to the man at his side cantered away.

Diggle gave Desmond a hail and came slowly up the lane, his face wearing its usual pleasant smile. His manner was always very friendly, and had the effect of making Desmond feel on good terms with himself.

"Well met, my friend," said Diggle cordially. "I was longing for a chat. Beshrew me if I have spoken more than a dozen words to-day, and that, to a man of my sociable temper, not to speak of my swift and practised tongue--'lingua celer et exercitata': you remember the phrase of Tully's--is a sore trial."

"You seemed to be having a conversation a moment ago," said Desmond.

"Seemed!--that is the very word. That excellent farmer--sure he hath a prosperous look--had mistaken me. 'Tis not the apparel makes the man; my attire is not of the best, I admit; but, I beg you tell me frankly, would you have taken me for a husbandman, one who with relentless ploughshare turns the stubborn soil, as friend Horace somewhere puts it? Would you, now?"

"Decidedly not. But did my brother so mistake you?"

"Your brother! Was that prosperous and well-mounted gentleman your brother?"

"Certainly. He is Richard Burke, and leases the Wilcote Farm."

"Noble pair of brothers!" exclaimed Diggle, seizing Desmond's reluctant hand. "I congratulate you, my friend. What a brother! I stopped him to ask the time of day. But permit me to say, friend Desmond, you appear somewhat downcast; your countenance hath not that serenity one looks for in a lad of your years. What is the trouble?"

"Oh, nothing to speak of," said Desmond curtly; he was vexed that his face still betrayed the irritation of the morning.

"Very well," said Diggle with a shrug. "Far be it from me to probe your sorrows. They are nothing to me, but sure a simple question from a friend----"

"Pardon me, Mr. Diggle," said Desmond impulsively, "I did not mean to offend you."

"My dear boy, a tough-hided traveller does not easily take offence.--Shall we walk?--D'you know, Master Desmond, I fancy I could make a shrewd guess at your trouble. Your brother--Richard, I think you said?--is a farmer, he was born a farmer, he has the air of a farmer, and a well-doing farmer to boot. But we are not all born with a love for mother-earth, and you, meseems, have dreamed of a larger life than lies within the pinfolds of a farm. To tell the truth, my lad, I have been studying you." They were walking now side by side along the Newport road. Desmond felt that the stranger was becoming personal; but his manner was so suave and sympathetic that he could not take offence. "Yes, I have been

studying you," continued Diggle. "And what is the sum of my discovery? You are wasting your life here. A country village is no place for a boy of ideas and imagination, of warm blood and springing fancy. The world is wide, my friend: why not adventure forth?"

"I have indeed thought of it, Mr. Diggle, but----"

"But me no buts," interrupted Diggle with a smile. "Your age is----"

"Near sixteen."

"Ah, still a boy; you have a year ere you reach the bourn of young manhood, as the Romans held it! But what matters that? Was not Scipio Africanus--namesake of the ingenuous youth that serves me--styled boy at twenty? Yet you are old enough to walk alone, and not in leading strings,--or waiting maybe for dead men's shoes."

"What do you mean, sir?" Desmond flashed out, reddening with indignation.

"Do I offend?" said Diggle innocently. "I make my apology. But I had heard, I own, that Master Desmond Burke was in high favour with your squire; 'tis even whispered that Master Desmond cherishes, cultivates, cossets the old man--a bachelor, I understand, and wealthy, and lacking kith or kin. Sure I should never have believed 'twas with any dishonourable motive."

"'Tis not, sir. I never thought of such a thing."

"I was sure of it. But to come back to my starting-point. 'Tis time you broke these narrow bounds. India, now--what better sphere for a young man bent on making his way? Look at Clive, whom you admire--as stupid a boy as you could meet in a day's march. Why, I can remember----" He caught himself up, but after the slightest pause resumed: "'Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit.' Look at Clive, I was saying; a lout, a bear, a booby--as a boy, mark you; yet now----! Is there a man whose name rings more loudly in the world's ear? And what Robert Clive is, that Desmond Burke might be if he had the mind and the will.--You are going farther? Ah, I have not your love of ambulation. I will bid you farewell for this time; sure it will profit you to ponder my words."

Desmond did ponder his words. He walked for three or four hours, thinking all the time. Who had said that he was waiting for the squire's shoes? He glowed with indignation at the idea of such a construction being placed upon his friendship for Sir Willoughby. "If they think that," he said to himself, "the sooner I go away the better." And the seed planted by Diggle took root and began to germinate with wonderful rapidity. To emulate Clive!--what would he not give for the chance? But how was it possible? Clive had begun as a writer in the service of the East India Company; but how could Desmond procure a nomination? Perhaps Sir Willoughby could help him; he might have influence with the Company's directors. But, supposing he obtained a nomination, how could he purchase his outfit? He had but a few guineas, and after what Diggle had said he would starve rather

than ask the squire for a penny. True, under his father's will he was to receive five thousand pounds at the age of twenty-one. Would Richard advance part of the sum? Knowing Richard, he hardly dared to hope for such a departure from the letter of the law. But it was at least worth attempting.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

In which blows are exchanged; and our hero, setting forth upon his travels, scents an adventure

That same day, at supper, seeing that Richard was apparently in a good temper, Desmond ventured to make a suggestion.

"Dick," he said frankly, "don't you think it would be better for all of us if I went away? You and I don't get along very well, and perhaps I was not cut out for a farmer."

Richard grunted, and Mrs. Burke looked apprehensively from one to the other.

"What's your idea?" asked Richard.

"Well, I had thought of a writership in the East India Company's service, or better still, a cadetship in the Company's forces."

"Hark to him!" exclaimed Richard, with a scornful laugh. "A second Clive, sink me! And where do you suppose the money is to come from?"

"Couldn't you advance a part of what is to come to me when I am twenty-one?"

"Not a penny, I tell you at once, not a penny. 'Tis enough to be saddled with you all these years. You may think yourself lucky if I can scrape together a tenth of the money that'll be due to you when you're twenty-one. That's the dead hand, if you like; why father put that provision in his will it passes common sense to understand. No, you'll have to stay and earn part of it, though in truth you'll never be worth your keep."

"That depends on the keeper," retorted Desmond, rather warmly.

"No insolence, now. I repeat, I will not advance one penny. Go and get some money out of the Squire, that is so precious fond of you."

"Richard, Richard!" said his mother anxiously.

"Mother, I'm the boy's guardian. I know what it is. He has been crammed with nonsense by that idle knave at the *Four Alls*. Look 'ee, my man, if I catch you speaking to him again, I'll flay your skin for you."

"Why shouldn't I? I saw you speaking to him."

"Hold your tongue, sir. The dog accosted me. I answered his question and passed on. Heed what I say: I'm a man of my word."

Desmond said no more. But before he fell asleep that night he had advanced one step further towards freedom. His request had met with the refusal he had anticipated. He could hope for no pecuniary assistance; it remained to see what could be done without money; and he resolved to take the first opportunity of consulting Diggle. It was Diggle who had suggested India as the field for his ambition; and the suggestion would hardly have been made if there were great obstacles in the way of its being acted on. Desmond made light of his brother's command that he should cut Diggle's acquaintance; it seemed to him only another act of tyranny, and his relations with Richard were such that to forbid a thing was to provoke him to do it.

His opportunity came next day. Late in the afternoon he met Diggle, as he had done many times before, walking in the fields, remote from houses. When Desmond caught sight of him, he was sauntering along, his eyes bent upon the ground, his face troubled. But he smiled on seeing Desmond.

"Well met, friend," he said; "'leni perfruor otio'--which is as much as to say--I bask in idleness. Well now, I perceive in your eye that you have been meditating my counsel. 'Tis well, friend Desmond. And whereto has your meditation arrived?"

"I have thought over what you said. I do wish to get away from here; I should like to go to India; indeed, I asked my brother to advance a part of some money that is to come to me, so that I might obtain service with the Company; but he refused."

"And you come to me for counsel. 'Tis well done, though I trow your brother would scarce be pleased to hear of it."

"He forbade me to speak to you."

"Egad he did! 'Haec summa est!' What has he against me?--a question to be asked. I am a stranger in these parts: that is ill; and buffeted by fortune: that is worse; and somewhat versed in humane letters: that, to the rustic intelligence, is a crime. Well, my lad, you have come to the right man at the right time. You are acquainted with my design shortly to return to the Indies--a rare field for a lad of mettle. You shall come with me."

"But are you connected with the Company? None other, I believed, have a right to trade."

"The Company! Sure, my lad, I am no friend to the Company, a set of stiff-

necked, ignorant, grasping, paunchy peddlers who fatten at home on the toil of better men. No, I am an adventurer, I own it; I am an interloper; and we interlopers, despite the Company's monopoly, yet contrive to keep body and soul together."

"Then I should not sail to India on a Company's ship?"

"Far from it, indeed. But let not that disturb you, there are other vessels. And for the passage--why, sure I could find you a place as supercargo or some such thing; you would thus keep the little money you have and add to it, forming a nest-egg which, I say it without boasting, I could help you to hatch into a fine brood. I am not without friends in the Indies, my dear boy; there are princes in that land whom I have assisted to their thrones; and if, on behalf of a friend, I ask of them some slight thing, provided it be honest--'tis the first law of friendship, says Tully, as you will remember, to seek honest things for our friends--if, I say, on your behalf, I proffer some slight request, sure the nawabs will vie to pleasure me, and the foundation of your fortune will be laid."

Desmond had not observed that, during this eloquent passage, Diggle had more than once glanced beyond him, as though his mind were not wholly occupied with his oratorical efforts. It was therefore with something of a shock that he heard him say in the same level tone:

"But I perceive your brother approaching. I am not the man to cause differences between persons near akin; I will therefore leave you; we will have further speech on the subject of our discourse."

He moved away. A moment after, Richard Burke came up in a towering passion.

"You brave me, do you?" he cried. "Did I not forbid you to converse with that vagabond?"

"You have no right to dictate to me on such matters," said Desmond hotly, facing his brother.

"I've no right, haven't I?" shouted Richard. "I've a guardian's right to thrash you if you disobey me, and by George! I'll keep my promise."

He lifted the riding whip, without which he seldom went abroad, and struck at Desmond. But the boy's blood was up. He sprang aside as the thong fell; it missed him, and before the whip could be raised again he had leapt towards his brother. Wrenching the stock from his grasp, Desmond flung the whip over the hedge into a green-mantled pool, and stood, his cheeks pale, his fists clenched, his eyes flaming, before the astonished man.

"Coward!" he cried, "'tis the last time you lay hands on me."

Recovered from his amazement at Desmond's resistance, Richard, purple with wrath, advanced to seize the boy. But Desmond, nimbly evading his clutch, slipped his foot within his brother's, and with a dexterous movement tripped him

up, so that he fell sprawling, with many an oath, on the miry road. Before he could regain his feet, Desmond had vaulted the hedge and set off at a run towards home. Diggle was nowhere in sight.

The die was now cast. Never before had Desmond actively retaliated upon his brother, and he knew him well enough to be sure that such an affront was unforgivable. The farm would no longer be safe for him. With startling suddenness his vague notions of leaving home were crystallized into a resolve. No definite plan formed itself in his mind as he raced over the fields. He only knew that the moment for departure had come, and he was hastening now to secure the little money he possessed and to make a bundle of his clothes and the few things he valued before Richard could return. Reaching the Grange, he slipped quietly upstairs, not daring to face his mother lest her grief should weaken his resolution, and in five minutes he returned with his bundle. He stole out through the garden, skirted the copse that bounded the farm enclosure, and ran for half a mile up the lane until he felt that he was out of reach. Then, breathless with haste, quivering with the shock of this sudden plunge into independence, he sat down on the grassy bank to reflect.

What had he done? It was no light thing for a boy of his years, ignorant of life and the world, to cut himself adrift from old ties and voyage into the unknown. Had he been wise? He had no trade as a stand-by; his whole endowment was his youth and his wits. Would they suffice? Diggle's talk had opened up an immense prospect, full of colour and mystery and romance, chiming well with his day-dreams. Was it possible that, sailing to India, he might find some of his dreams come true? Could he trust Diggle, a stranger, by his own admission an adventurer, a man who had run through two fortunes already? He had no reason for distrust; Diggle was well educated, a gentleman, frank, amiable. What motive could he have for leading a boy astray?

Mingled with Desmond's Irish impulsiveness there was a strain of caution derived from the stolid English yeomen his forebears on the maternal side. He felt the need, before crossing his Rubicon, of taking counsel with some one older and wiser--with a tried friend. Sir Willoughby Stokes, the squire, had always been kind to him. Would it not be well to put his case to the Squire and follow his advice? But he durst not venture to the Hall yet. His brother might suspect his errand and seize him there, or intercept him on the way. He would wait. It was the Squire's custom to spend a quiet hour in his own room long after the time when other folk in that rural neighbourhood were abed. Desmond sometimes sat with him there, reading or playing chess. If he went up to the Hall at nine o'clock he would be sure of a welcome.

The evening passed slowly for Desmond in his enforced idleness. At nine o'clock, leaving his bundle in a hollow tree, he set off toward the Hall, taking a

short cut across the fields. It was a dark night, and he stopped with a start as, on descending a stile overhung by a spreading sycamore, he almost struck against a person who had just preceded him.

"Who's that?" he asked quickly, stepping back a little: it was unusual to meet any one in the fields at so late an hour.

"Be that you, Measter Desmond?"

"Oh, 'tis you, Dickon. What are you doing this way at such an hour? You ought to have been abed long ago."

"Ay, sure, Measter Desmond; but I be goin' to see Squire," said the old man, apparently with some hesitation.

"That's odd. So am I. We may as well walk together, then--for fear of the ghosts, eh, Dickon?"

"I binna afeard o' ghosts, not I. True, 'tis odd I be goin' to see Squire. I feel it so. Squire be a high man, and I ha' never dared lift up my voice to him oothout axen. But 'tis to be. I ha' summat to tell him, low-born as I be; ay, I mun tell him, cost what it may."

"Well, he's not a dragon. I have something to tell him too--cost what it may."

There was silence for a space. Then Dickon said, tremulously:

"Bin it a great matter, yourn, sir, I make bold to ax?"

"That's as it turns out, Dickon. But what is it with you, old man? Is aught amiss?"

"Not wi' me, sir, not wi' me, thank the Lord above. But I seed ya, Measter Desmond, t'other day, in speech win that--that Diggle as he do call hisself, and--and, I tell ya true, sir, I dunna like the looks on him; no, he binna a right man; an' I were afeard as he med ha' bin fillin' yer head wi' fine tales about the wonders o' the world an' all."

"Is that all, Dickon? You fear my head may be turned, eh? Don't worry about me."

"Why, sir, ya may think me bold, but I do say this: If so be ya gets notions in yer head--notions o' goin' out alone an' seein' the world an' all, go up an' ax Squire about it. Squire he done have a wise head; he'll advise ya fur the best; an' sure I bin he'd warn ya not to have no dealin's win that Diggle, as he do call hisself."

"Why, does the Squire know him, then?"

"'Tis my belief Squire do know everything an' every body. Diggle he med not know, to be sure, but if so be ya say 'tis a lean man, wi' sharp nose, an' black eyes like live coals, an' a smilin' mouth--why, Squire knows them sort, he done, and wouldna trust him not a' ell. But maybe ya'd better go on, sir: my old shanks be slow fur one so young an' nimble."

"No hurry, Dickon. Lucky the Squire was used to London hours in his youth, or we'd find him abed. See, there's a light in the Hall; 'tis in the strong-room next

to the library; Sir Willoughby is reckoning up his rents maybe, though 'tis late for that."

"Ay, ya knows the Hall, true. Theer be a terrible deal o' gowd an' silver up in that room, fur sure, more'n a aged man like me could tell in a week."

"The light is moving; it seems Sir Willoughby is finishing up for the night. I hope we shall not be too late."

But at this moment a winding of the path brought another face of the Hall into view.

"Why, Dickon," exclaimed Desmond, "there's another light; 'tis the Squire's own room. He cannot be in two places at once; 'tis odd at this time of night. Come, stir your stumps, old man."

They hurried along, scrambling through the hedge that bounded the field, Desmond leaping, Dickon wading, the brook that ran alongside the road. Turning to the left, they came to the front entrance to the Hall, and passed through the wicket-gate into the grounds. They could see the Squire's shadow on the blind of the parlour; but the lighted window of the strong-room was now hidden from them. Stepping in that direction, to satisfy a strange curiosity he felt, Desmond halted in amazement as he saw, faintly silhouetted against the sky, a ladder placed against the wall, resting on the sill of the strong-room. His surprise at seeing lights in two rooms, in different wings of the house, so late at night, changed to misgiving and suspicion. He hastened back to Dickon.

"I fear some mischief is afoot," he said. Drawing the old man into the shade of a shrubbery, he added: "Remain here; do not stir until I come for you, or unless you hear me call."

Leaving Dickon in trembling perplexity and alarm, he stole forward on tip-toe towards the house.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

In which Job Grinsell explains; and three visitors come by night to the "Four Alls."

At the foot of the wall lay a flower-bed, now bare and black, separated by a gravel path from a low shrubbery of laurel. Behind this latter Desmond stole, screened

from observation by the bushes. Coming to a spot exactly opposite the ladder, he saw that it rested on the sill of the library window, which was open. The library itself was dark, but there was still a dull glow in the next room. At the foot of the ladder stood a man. The meaning of it all was plain. The large sum of money recently received by Sir Willoughby as rents had tempted some one to rob him. The robber must have learnt that the money was kept in the strong-room; and it argued either considerable daring or great ignorance to have timed his visit for an hour when any one familiar with the Squire's habits would have known that he would not yet have retired to rest.

Desmond was about to run round to the other side of the house and rouse the Squire when the dim light in the strong-room was suddenly extinguished. Apparently the confederate of the man below had secured his booty and was preparing to return. Desmond remained fixed to the spot, in some doubt what to do. He might call to Dickon and make a rush on the man before him; but the labourer was old and feeble, and the criminal was no doubt armed. A disturber would probably be shot, and though the report would alarm the household, the burglars would have time to escape in the darkness. Save Sir Willoughby himself, doubtless every person in the house was by this time abed asleep.

It seemed best to Desmond to send Dickon for help while he himself still mounted guard. Creeping silently as a cat along the shrubbery, he hastened back to the labourer, told him in a hurried whisper of his discovery, and bade him steal round to the servants' quarters, rouse them quietly, and bring one or two to trap the man at the foot of the ladder while others made a dash through the library upon the marauder in the strong-room. Dickon, whose wits were nimbler than his legs, understood what he was to do and slipped away, Desmond returning to his coign of vantage as noiselessly as he came.

He was just in time to see that a heavy object, apparently a box, was being lowered from the library window on to the ladder. Sliding slowly down, it came to the hands of the waiting man; immediately afterwards the rope by which it had been suspended was dropped from above, and the dark figure of a man mounted the sill.

He already had one leg over, preparing to descend, when Desmond, with a sudden rush, dashed through the shrubs and sprang across the path. The confederate was stooping over the booty; his back was towards the shrubbery; at the snapping of twigs and the crunching of the gravel he straightened himself and turned. Before he was aware of what was happening, Desmond caught at the ladder by the lowest rung, and jerked it violently outwards so that its top fell several feet below the window-sill, resting on the wall out of reach of the man above. Desmond heard a smothered exclamation break from the fellow, but he could pay no further attention to him, for, as he rose from stooping over the ladder, he was

set upon by a burly form. He dodged behind the ladder. The man sprang after him, blindly, clumsily, and tripped over the box. But he was up in a moment, and, reckless of the consequences of raising an alarm, was fumbling for a pistol, when there fell upon his ears a shout, the tramp of hurrying feet, and the sound of another window being thrown open.

With a muffled curse he swung on his heel, and made to cross the gravel path and plunge into the shrubbery. But Desmond was too quick for him. Springing upon his back, he caught his arms, thus preventing him from using his pistol. He was a powerful man, and Desmond alone would have been no match for him; but before he could wriggle himself entirely free, three half-clad men-servants came up with a rush, and in a trice he was secured.

In the excitement of these close-packed moments Desmond had forgotten the other man, whom he had last seen with his leg dangling over the window-sill. He looked up now; the window was still open; the ladder lay exactly where he had jerked it; evidently the robber had not descended.

"Quick!" cried Desmond. "Round to the door! The other fellow will escape!"

He himself sprinted round the front of the house to the door by which the servants had issued, and met the Squire hobbling along on his stick, pistol in hand.

"We have got one, sir!" cried Desmond. "Have you seen the other?"

"What--why--how many villains are there?" replied the Squire, who between amazement and wrath was scarcely able to appreciate the situation.

"There was a man in the library; he did not come down the ladder; he may be still in the house."

"The deuce he is! Desmond, take the pistol, and shoot the knave like a dog if you meet him."

"I'll guard the door, Sir Willoughby. They are bringing the other man round. Then we'll all go into the house and search. He can't get out without being seen if the other doors are locked."

"Locked and barred. I did it myself an hour ago. I'll hang the villain."

In a few moments the servants came up with their captive and the box, old Dickon following. Only their figures could be seen: it was too dark to distinguish features.

"You scoundrel!" cried the Squire, brandishing his stick. "You'll hang for this. Take him into the house. In with you all. You scoundrel!"

"An you please, Sir Willoughby, 'tis----" began one of the servants.

"In with you, I say," roared the Squire. "I'll know how to deal with the villain."

The culprit was hustled into the house, and the group followed, Sir Willoughby bringing up the rear. Inside he barred and locked the door, and bade the men carry their prisoner to the library. The corridors and staircase were dark; but by the time the Squire had mounted on his gouty legs candles had been lighted,

and the face of the housebreaker was for the first time visible. Two servants held the man; the others, with Desmond and Dickon, looked on in amazement.

"Job Grinsell, on my soul and body!" cried the Squire. "You villain! You ungrateful knave! Is this how you repay me? I might have hanged you, you scoundrel, when you poached my game; a word from me and Sir Philip would have seen you whipped before he let his inn to you; but I was too kind; I am a fool; and you---- by gad, you shall hang this time."

The Squire's face was purple with anger, and he shook his stick as though then and there he would have wrought chastisement on the offender. Grinsell's flabby face, however, expressed amusement rather than fear.

"Bless my soul!" cried the Squire, suddenly turning to his men, "I'd forgotten the other villain. Off with you; search for him; bring him here."

Desmond had already set off to look for Grinsell's accomplice. Taper in hand he went quickly from room to room; joined by the Squire's servants, he searched every nook and cranny of the house, examining doors and windows, opening cupboards, poking at curtains--all in vain. At last, at the end of a dark corridor, he came upon an open window some ten feet above the ground. It was so narrow that a man of ordinary size must have had some difficulty in squeezing his shoulders through; but Desmond was forced to the conclusion that the housebreaker had sprung out here, and by this time had made good his escape. Disappointed at his failure, he returned with the servants to the library.

"We can't find him, Sir Willoughby," said Desmond, as he opened the door. To his surprise, Grinsell and Dickon were gone; no one but the Squire was in the room, and he was sitting in a big chair, limp and listless, his eyes fixed upon the floor.

"We can't find him," repeated Desmond.

The Squire looked up.

"What did you say?" he asked, as though the events of the past half-hour were a blank. "Oh, 'tis you, Desmond, yes; what can I do for you?"

Desmond was embarrassed.

"I--we have--we have looked for the other villain, Sir Willoughby," he stammered. "We can't find him."

"Ah! 'Twas you gave the alarm. Good boy; zeal; excellent; but a little mistake; yes, Grinsell explained; a mistake, Desmond."

The Squire spoke hurriedly, disconnectedly, with an embarrassment even greater than Desmond's.

"But, sir," the boy began, "I saw----"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the old man. "I know all about it. But Grinsell's explanation--yes, I know all about it. I am obliged to you, Desmond; but I am satisfied with Grinsell's explanation; I shall go no further in the matter."

He groaned and put his hand to his head.

"Are you ill, Sir Willoughby?" asked Desmond anxiously.

The Squire looked up; his face was an image of distress. He was silent for a moment; then said slowly:

"Sick at heart, Desmond, sick at heart. I am an old man--an old man."

Desmond was uncomfortable. He had never seen the Squire in such a mood, and had a healthy boy's natural uneasiness at any display of feeling.

"You see that portrait?" the Squire went on, pointing wearily with his stick at the head of a young man done in oils. "The son of my oldest friend--my dear old friend Merriman. I never told you of him. Nine years ago, Desmond--nine years ago, my old friend was as hale and hearty a man as I myself, and George was the apple of his eye. They were for the King--God save him!--and when word came that Prince Charles was marching south from Scotland they arranged secretly with a party of loyal gentlemen to join him. But I hung back, I had not their courage: I am alive, and I lost my friend."

His voice sank, and, leaning heavily upon his stick, he gazed vacantly into space. Desmond was perplexed, and still more ill at ease. What had this to do with the incidents of the night? He shrank from asking the question.

"Yes, I lost my friend," the Squire continued. "We had news of the Prince; he had left Carlisle; he was moving southwards, about to strike a blow for his father's throne. He was approaching Derby. George Merriman sent a message to his friends, appointing a rendezvous: gallant gentlemen, they would join the Stuart flag! The day came, they met, and the minions of the Hanoverian surrounded them. Betrayed!--poor loyal gentlemen!--betrayed by one who had their confidence and abused it--one of my own blood, Desmond--the shame of it! They were tried, hanged--hanged! It broke my old friend's heart; he died; 'twas one of my blood that killed him."

Again speech failed him. Then, with a sudden change of manner, he said:

"But 'tis late, boy; your brother keeps early hours. I am not myself to-night, the memory of the past unnerves me. Bid me good-night, boy."

Desmond hesitated, biting his lips. What of the motive of his visit? He had come to ask advice: could he go without having mentioned the subject that troubled him? The old man had sunk into a reverie, his lips moved as though he communed with himself. Desmond had not the heart to intrude his concerns on one so bowed with grief.

"Good-night, Sir Willoughby!" he said.

The Squire paid no heed, and Desmond, vexed, bewildered, went slowly from the room.

At the outer door he found Dickon awaiting him.

"The Squire has let Grinsell go, Dickon," he said; "he says 'twas all a mistake."

"If Squire says it, then 't must be," said Dickon slowly, nodding his head. "We'n better be goin' home, sir."

"But you had something to tell Sir Willoughby?"

"Ay sure, but he knows it--knows it better'n me."

"Come, Dickon, what is this mystery? I am in a maze: what is it, man?"

"Binna fur a' aged poor feller like me to say. We'n better go home, sir."

Nothing that Desmond said prevailed upon Dickon to tell more, and the two started homewards across the fields. Some minutes afterwards they heard the sound of a horse's hoofs clattering on the road to their left, and going in the same direction. It was an unusual sound at that late hour, and both stopped instinctively and looked at each other.

"A late traveller, Dickon," said Desmond.

"Ay, maybe a king's post, Measter Desmond," replied the old man. Without more words they went on till they came to a lane leading to the labourer's cottage.

"We part here," said Desmond. "Dickon, good-night!"

"Good-night to you, sir!" said the old man. He paused: then in a grave, earnest, quavering voice, he added: "The Lord Almighty have you in His keeping, Measter Desmond, watch over you night and day, now and evermore."

And with that he hobbled down the lane.

At nine o'clock that night Richard Burke left the Grange--an unusual thing for him--and walked quickly to the *Four Alls*. The inn was closed, and shutters darkened the windows; but, seeing a chink of light between the folds, the farmer knocked at the door. There was no answer. He knocked again and again, grumbling under his breath; at length, when his patience was almost exhausted, a window above opened, and, looking up, Mr. Burke dimly saw a head.

"Is that you, Grinsell?" he asked.

"No, massa."

"Oh, you're the black boy, Mr. Diggle's servant. Is your master in?"

"No, massa."

"Well, come down and open the door. I'll wait for him."

"Massa said no open door for nuffin."

"Confound you, open at once! He knows me, I'm a friend of his; open the door!"

"Massa said no open door for nobody."

The farmer pleaded, stormed, cursed, but Scipio Africanus was inflexible. His master had given him orders, and the boy had learnt, at no little cost, that it was the wisest and safest policy to obey. Finding that neither threats nor persuasion availed, Burke took a stride or two in the direction of home; then he halted,

pondered for a moment, changed his mind, and began to pace up and down the road.

His restless movements were by and by checked by the sound of footsteps approaching. He crossed the road, stood in the shadow of an elm, and waited. The footsteps drew nearer; he heard low voices, and now discerned two dark figures against the lighter road. They came to the inn and stopped. One of them took a key from his pocket and inserted it in the lock.

"'Tis you at last," said Burke, stepping out from his place of concealment. "That boy of yours would not let me in, hang him!"

At the first words Diggle started and swung round, his right hand flying to his pocket; but recognizing the voice almost immediately, he laughed.

"'Tis you, my friend," he said. "'Multa de nocte profectus es.' But you've forgot all your Latin, Dick. What is the news, man? Come in."

"The bird is flitting, Sim, that's all. He has not been home. His mother was in a rare to-do. I pacified her, told her I'd sent him to Chester to sell oats--haw, haw! He has taken some clothes and gone. But he won't go far, I trow, without seeing you, and I look to you to carry out the bargain."

"Egad, Dick, I need no persuasion. He won't go without me, I promise you that. I've a bone to pick with him myself--eh, friend Job?"

Grinsell swore a hearty oath. At this moment the silence without was broken by the sound of a trotting horse.

"Is the door bolted?" whispered Burke. "I mustn't be seen here."

"Trust me fur that," said Grinsell. "But no one will stop here at this time o' night."

But the three men stood silent, listening. The sound steadily grew louder; the horse was almost abreast of the inn; it was passing--but no, it came to a halt; they heard a man's footsteps, and the sound of the bridle being hitched to a hook in the wall. Then there was a sharp rap at the door.

"Who's there?" cried Grinsell gruffly.

"Open the door instantly," said a loud, masterful voice.

Burke looked aghast.

"You can't let him in," he whispered.

The others exchanged glances.

"Open the door," cried the voice again. "D'you hear, Grinsell? At once!--or I ride to Drayton for the constables!"

Grinsell gave Diggle a meaning look.

"Slip out by the back door, Mr. Burke," said the innkeeper. "I'll make a noise with the bolts so that he cannot hear you."

Burke hastily departed, and Grinsell, after long, loud fumbling with the bolts, threw open the door and gave admittance to the Squire.

"Ah, you are here both," said Sir Willoughby, standing in the middle of the floor, his riding-whip in his hand. "Now, Mr.--Diggle, I think you call yourself. I'm a man of few words, as you know. I have to say this. I give you till eight o'clock to-morrow morning; if you are not gone, bag and baggage, by that time, I will issue a warrant. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Diggle with his enigmatical smile.

"And one word more. Show your face again in these parts and I will have you arrested. I have spared you twice for your mother's sake. This is my last warning. Grinsell, you hear that too?"

"I hear 't," growled the man.

"Remember it, for, mark my words, you'll share his fate."

The Squire was gone.

Grinsell scowled with malignant spite; Diggle laughed softly.

"'Quanta de spe decidi!'" he said, "which in plain English, friend Job, means that we are dished--utterly, absolutely. I must go on my travels again; well, such was my intention; the only difference is, that I go with an empty purse instead of a full one. Who'd have thought the old dog would ha' been such an unconscionable time dying!"

"Gout or no gout, he's good for another ten year," growled the innkeeper.

"Well, I'll give him five. And with the boy out of the way, maybe I'll come to my own even yet. The young puppy!" At this moment Diggle's face was by no means pleasant to look upon. "Fate has always had a grudge against me, Job. In the old days, I bethink me, 'twas I that was always found out. You had many an escape."

"Till the last. But I've come out of this well." He chuckled. "To think what a fool blood makes of a man! Squire winna touch me, 'cause of you. But it must gall him; ay, it must gall him."

"Hist!" said Diggle suddenly. "There are footsteps again. Is it Burke coming back? The door's open, Job."

The innkeeper went to the door and peered into the dark. A slight figure came up at that moment--a boy, with a bundle in his hand.

"Is that you, Grinsell? Is Mr. Diggle in?"

"Come in, my friend," said Diggle, hastening to the door. "We were just talking of you. Come in; 'tis a late hour; 'si vespertinus subito'--you remember old Horace? True, we haven't a hen to baste with Falernian for you, but sure friend Job can find a wedge of Cheshire and a mug of ale. Come in."

And Desmond went into the inn.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

In which the reader becomes acquainted with William Bulger and other sailor men; and our hero as a squire of dames acquits himself with credit.

One warm October afternoon, some ten days after the night of his visit to the *Four Alls*, Desmond was walking along the tow-path of the Thames, somewhat north of Kingston. As he came to the spot where the river bends round towards Teddington, he met a man plodding along with a rope over his shoulder, hauling a laden hoy.

"Can you tell me the way to the *Waterman's Rest*?" asked Desmond.

"Ay, that can I," replied the man without stopping. "'Tis about a quarter-mile behind me, right on waterside. And the best beer this side o' Greenwich."

Thanking him, Desmond walked on. He had not gone many yards further before there fell upon his ear, from some point ahead, the sound of several rough voices raised in chorus, trolling a tune that seemed familiar to him. As he came nearer to the singers, he distinguished the words of the song, and remembered the occasion on which he had heard them before: the evening of Clive's banquet at Market Drayton--the open window of the *Four Alls*, the voice of Marmaduke Diggle.

Sir William Norris, Masulipatam--

these were the first words he caught; and immediately afterwards the voices broke into the second verse:

Says Governor Pitt, Fort George, Madras,
"I know what you are: an ass, an ass,
An ass, an ass, an ASS, an ASS,"
Signed "Governor Pitt, Fort George, Madras."

And at the conclusion there was a clatter of metal upon wood, and then one voice,

loud and rotund, struck up the first verse once more--

Says Billy Norris, Masulipatam--

The singer was in the middle of the stave when Desmond, rounding a privet hedge, came upon the scene. A patch of greensward, sloping up from a slipway on the riverside; a low, cosy-looking inn of red brick covered with a crimson creeper; in front of it a long deal table, and seated at the table a group of some eight or ten seamen, each with a pewter tankard before him. To the left, and somewhat in the rear of the long table, was a smaller one, at which two seamen, by their garb a cut above the others, sat opposite each other, intent on some game.

Desmond's attention was drawn towards the larger table. Rough as was the common seaman of George the Second's time, the group here collected would have been hard to match for villainous looks. One had half his teeth knocked out, another a broken nose; all bore scars and other marks of battery.

Among them, however, there was one man marked out by his general appearance and facial expression as superior to the rest. In dress he was no different from his mates; he wore the loose blouse, the pantaloons, the turned-up cloth hat of the period. But he towered above them in height; he had a very large head, with a very small squab nose, merry eyes, and a fringe of jet-black hair round cheeks and chin. When he removed his hat presently he revealed a shiny pink skull, rising from short wiry hair as black as his whiskers. Alone of the group, he wore no love-locks or greased pigtail. In his right hand, when Desmond first caught sight of him, he held a tankard, waving it to and fro in time with his song. He had lost his left hand and forearm, which were replaced by an iron hook projecting from a wooden socket, just visible in his loose sleeve.

He was half-way through the second stanza when he noticed Desmond standing at the angle of the hedge a few yards away. He fixed his merry eyes on the boy, and, beating time with his hook, went on with the song in stentorian tones--

An ass, an ass, an ASS, an ASS,
Signed "Governor Pitt, Fort George, Madras."

The others took up the chorus, and finally brought their tankards down upon the deal with a resounding whack.

"Ahoy, Mother Wiggs, more beer!" shouted the big man.

Desmond went forward.

"Is this the *Waterman's Rest*?"

"Ay, ay, young gen'leman, and a blamed restful place it is, too, fit for watermen what en't naught but landlubbers, speaking by the book, but not for the likes of us jack tars. Eh, mateys?"

His companions grunted acquiescence.

"I have a message for Mr. Toley; is he here?"

"Ay, that he is. That's him at the table yonder. Mr. Toley, sir, a young gen'leman to see you."

Desmond advanced to the smaller table. The two men looked up from their game of dominoes. One was a tall, lean fellow, with lined and sunken cheeks covered with iron-gray stubble, a very sharp nose, and colourless eyes; the expression of his features was melancholy in the extreme. The other was a shorter man, snub-nosed, big-mouthed; one eye was blue, the other green, and they looked in contrary directions. His hat was tilted forward, resting on two bony prominences above his eyebrows.

"Well?" said Mr. Toley, the man of melancholy countenance.

"I have a message from Captain Barker," said Desmond. "I am to say that he expects you and the men at Custom House Quay next Wednesday morning, high tide at five o'clock."

Mr. Toley lifted the tankard at his left hand, drained it, smacked his lips, then said in a hollow voice:

"Bulger, Custom House Quay, Wednesday morning, five o'clock."

A grunt of satisfaction and relief rolled round the company, and in response to repeated cries for more beer a stout woman in a mob cap and dirty apron came from the inn with a huge copper can, from which she proceeded to fill the empty tankards.

"Is the press still hot, sir?" asked Mr. Toley.

"Yes. Four men, I was told, were hauled out of the *Good Intent* yesterday."

"And four bad bargains for the King," put in the second man, whose cross glances caused Desmond no little discomfort.

At this moment Joshua Wiggs the innkeeper came up, carrying three fowling-pieces.

"There be plenty o' ducks to-day, mister," he said.

"Then we'll try our luck," said Mr. Toley, rising. "Thank 'ee, my lad," he added to Desmond. "You'll take a sup with the men afore you go? Bulger, see to the gentleman."

"Ay, ay, sir. Come aboard, matey."

He made a place for Desmond at his side on the bench, and called to Mother Wiggs to bring a mug for the gentleman. Meanwhile, Mr. Toley and his companion had each taken a fowling-piece and gone away with the landlord. Bulger winked at his companions, and when the sportsmen were out of earshot he broke

into a guffaw.

"Rare sport they'll have! I wouldn't be in Mr. Toley's shoes for something. What's a cock-eyed man want with a gun in his hand, eh, mateys?"

Desmond felt somewhat out of his element in his present company; but having reasons of his own for making himself pleasant, he said, by way of opening a conversation:

"You seem pleased at the idea of going to sea again, Mr. Bulger."

"Well, we are and we en't, eh, mateys? The *Waterman's Rest* en't exactly the kind of place to spend shore leave; it en't a patch on Wapping or Rotherhithe. And to tell 'ee true, we're dead sick of it. But there's reasons; there mostly is; and the whys and wherefores, therefores and becauses, I dessay you know, young gen'leman, a-comin' from Captain Barker."

"The press-gang?"

"Ay, the press is hot in these days. Cap'n sent us here to be out o' the way, and the orficers to look arter us. Not but what 'tis safer for them too; for if Mr. Sunman showed his cock-eyes anywhere near the Pool, he'd be nabbed by the bailiffs, sure as he's second mate o' the *Good Intent.* Goin' to sea's bad enough, but the *Waterman's Rest* and holdin' on the slack here's worse, eh, mateys?"

"Ay, you're right there, Bulger."

"But why don't you like going to sea?" asked Desmond.

"Why? You're a landlubber, sir--meanin' no offence--or you wouldn't ax sich a foolish question. At sea 'tis all rope's end and salt pork, with Irish horse for a tit-bit."

"Irish horse?"

"Ay. That's our name for it. 'Cos why? Explain to the gen'leman, mateys."

With a laugh the men began to chant--

Salt horse, salt horse, what brought you here?
You've carried turf for many a year.
From Dublin quay to Ballyack
You've carried turf upon your back.

"That's the why and wherefore of it," added Bulger. "Cooks call it salt beef, same as French mounseers don't like the sound of taters an' calls 'em pummy detair; but we calls it Irish horse, which we know the flavour. Accordingly, notwithstandin' an' for that reason, if you axes the advice of an old salt, never you go to sea, matey."

"That's unfortunate," said Desmond with a smile, "because I expect to sail next Wednesday morning, high tide at five o'clock."

"Binks and barnacles! Be you agoin' to sail with us?"

"I hope so."

"Billy come up! You've got business out East then?"

"Not yet, but I hope to have. I'm going out as supercargo."

"Oh! As supercargo!"

Bulger winked at his companions, and a hoarse titter went the round of the table.

"Well," continued Bulger, "the supercargo do have a better time of it than us poor chaps. And what do Cap'n Barker say to you as supercargo, which you are very young, sir?"

"I don't know Captain Barker."

"Oho! But I thought as how you brought a message from the captain?"

"Yes, but it came through Mr. Diggle."

"Ah! Mr. Diggle?"

"A friend of mine--a friend of the captain. He has arranged everything."

"I believe you, matey. He's arranged everything. Supercargo! Well, to be sure! Never a supercargo as I ever knowed but wanted a man to look arter him, fetch and carry for him, so to say. How would I do, if I might make so bold?"

"Thanks," said Desmond, smiling as he surveyed the man's huge form. "But I think Captain Barker might object to that. You'd be of more use on deck, in spite of----"

He paused, but his glance at the iron hook had not escaped Bulger's observant eye.

"Spite of the curlin' tongs, you'd say. Bless you, spit 't out, I en't tender in my feelin's."

"Besides," added Desmond, "I shall probably make use of the boy who has been attending on me at the *Goat and Compasses*--a clever little black boy of Mr. Diggle's."

"Black boys be hanged! I never knowed a Sambo as was any use on board ship. They howls when they're sick, and they're allers sick, and never larns to tell a marlin-spike from a belayin' pin."

"But Scipio isn't one of that sort. He's never sick, Mr. Diggle says; they've been several voyages together, and Scipio knows a ship from stem to stern."

"Scipio, which his name is? Oncommon name, that."

There was a new tone in Bulger's voice, and he gave Desmond a keen and, as it seemed, a troubled look.

"Yes, it is strange," replied the boy, vaguely aware of the change of manner. "But Mr. Diggle has ways of his own."

"This Mr. Diggle, now; I may be wrong, but I should say--yes, he's short, with bow legs and a wart on his cheek?"

"No, no; you must be thinking of some one else. He is tall, rather a well-

looking man; he hasn't a wart, but there is a scar on his brow, something like yours."

"Ah! I know they sort; a fightin' sort o' feller, with a voice like--which I say, like a nine-pounder?"

"Well, not exactly; he speaks rather quietly; he is well educated, too, to judge by the Latin he quotes."

"Sure now, a scholard. Myself, I never had no book larnin' to speak of; never got no further than pothooks an' hangers!"

He laughed as he lifted his hook. But he seemed to be disinclined for further conversation. He buried his face in his tankard, and when he had taken a long pull set the vessel on the table and stared at it with a preoccupied air. He seemed to have forgotten the presence of Desmond. The other men were talking among themselves, and Desmond, having by this time finished his mug of beer, rose to go on his way.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bulger," he said; "we shall meet again next Wednesday."

"Ay, ay, sir," returned the man.

He looked long after the boy as he walked away.

"Supercargo!" he muttered. "Diggle! I may be wrong, but----"

Desmond had come through Southwark and across Clapham and Wimbledon Common, thus approaching the *Waterman's Rest* from the direction of Kingston. Accustomed as he was to long tramps, he felt no fatigue, and with a boy's natural curiosity he decided to return to the city by a different route, following the river bank. He had not walked far before he came to the ferry at Twickenham. The view on the other side of the river attracted him: meadows dotted with cows and sheep, a verdant hill with pleasant villas here and there; and seeing the ferryman resting on his oars, he accosted him.

"Can I get to London if I cross here?" he asked.

"Sure you can, sir. Up the hill past Mr. Walpole his house; then you comes to Isleworth and Brentford, and a straight road through Hammersmith village--a fine walk, sir, and only a penny for the ferryman."

Desmond paid his penny and crossed. He sauntered along up Strawberry Hill, taking a good look at the snug little house upon which Mr. Horace Walpole was spending much money and pains. Wandering on, and preferring by-lanes to the high road, he lost his bearings, and at length, fearing that he was going in the wrong direction, he stopped at a wayside cottage to inquire the way. He was further out than he knew. The woman who came to the door in answer to his knock said that, having come so far, he had better proceed in the same direction until he reached Hounslow, and then strike into the London road and keep to it. Desmond was nothing loth. He had heard of Hounslow and those notorious "Diana's foresters" Plunket and James Maclean--highwaymen who a few years

before had been the terror of night travellers across the lonely Heath. There was a fascination about the scene of their exploits. So he trudged on, feeling now a little tired, and hoping to get a lift in some farmer's cart that might be going towards London.

More than once as he walked his thoughts recurred to the scene at the *Waterman's Rest.* They were a rough, villainous-looking set, these members of the crew of the *Good Intent*! Of course, as supercargo he would not come into close contact with them; and Mr. Diggle had warned him that he would find seafaring men somewhat different from the country folk among whom all his life hitherto had been passed. Diggle's frankness had pleased him. They had left the *Four Alls* early on the morning after that strange incident at the Squire's. Desmond had told his friend what had happened, and Diggle, apparently surprised to learn of Grinsell's villainy, had declared that the sooner they were out of his company the better. They had come by easy stages to London, and were now lodging at a small inn near the Tower: not a very savoury neighbourhood, Diggle admitted, but convenient. Diggle had soon obtained for Desmond a berth on board the *Good Intent* bound for the East Indies, and from what he let drop the boy understood that he was to sail as supercargo. He had not yet seen the vessel; she was painting, and would shortly be coming up to the Pool. Nor had he seen Captain Barker, who was very much occupied, said Diggle, and had a great deal of trouble in keeping his crew out of the clutches of the pressgang. Some of the best of them had been sent to the *Waterman's Rest* in charge of the chief and second mates. It was at Diggle's suggestion that he had been deputed to convey the captain's message to the men.

It was drawing towards evening when Desmond reached Hounslow Heath, a wide bare expanse of scrubby land intersected by a muddy road. A light mist lay over the ground, and he was thankful that the road to London was perfectly direct, so that there was no further risk of his losing his way. The solitude and the dismal appearance of the country, together with its ill-repute, made him quicken his pace, though he had no fear of molestation; having nothing to lose he would be but poor prey for a highwayman, and he trusted to his cudgel to protect him from the attentions of any single footpad or tramp.

Striding along, in the gathering dusk he came suddenly upon a curious scene. A heavy travelling carriage was drawn half across the road, its forewheels perilously near the ditch. Near by was a lady, standing with arms stiff and hands clenched, stamping her foot as she addressed, in no measured terms, two men who were rolling over one another in a desperate tussle a few yards away on the heath. As Desmond drew nearer he perceived that a second and a younger lady stood at the horses' heads, grasping the bridles firmly with both hands.

His footsteps were unheard on the heavy road, and the elder lady's back

being towards him he came up to her unawares. She started with a little cry when she saw a stranger move towards her out of the gloom. But perceiving at a second glance that he was only a boy, with nothing villainous about his appearance, she turned to him impulsively and, taking him by the sleeve, said:

"There! You see them! The wretches! They are drunk and pay no heed to me! Can you part them? I do not wish to be benighted on this heath. The wretch uppermost is the coachman."

"I might part them, perhaps," said Desmond dubiously. "Of course I will try, ma'am."

"Sure I wouldn't trust 'em, mamma," called the younger lady from the horses' heads. "The man is too drunk to drive."

"I fear 'tis so. 'Tis not our own man, sir. As we returned to-day from a visit to Taplow our coachman was trampled by a horse at Slough, and my husband stayed with him--an old and trusty servant--till he could consult a surgeon. We found a substitute at the inn to drive us home. But the wretch brought a bottle; he drank with the footman all along the road; and now, as you see, they are at each other's throats in their drunken fury. Sure we shall never get home in time for the rout we are bid to."

"Shall I drive you to London, ma'am?" said Desmond. "'Twere best to leave the men to settle their differences."

"But can you drive?"

"Oh yes," replied Desmond with a smile. "I am used to horses."

"Then I beg you to oblige us. Yes, let the wretches fight themselves sober. Phyllis, this gentleman will drive us; come."

The girl--a fair, rosy-cheeked, merry-eyed damsel of fifteen or thereabouts--left the horses' heads and entered the carriage with her mother. Desmond made a rapid examination of the harness to see that all was right; then he mounted the box and drove off. The noise of the rumbling wheels penetrated the besotted intelligence of the struggling men; they scrambled to their feet, looked wildly about them, and set off in pursuit. But they had no command of their limbs; they staggered clumsily this way and that, and finally found their level in the slimy ditch that flanked the road.

Desmond whipped up the horses in the highest spirits. He had hoped for a hit in a farmer's cart; fortune had favoured him in giving him four roadsters to drive himself. And no boy, certainly not one of his romantic impulses, but would feel elated at the idea of helping ladies in distress, and on a spot known far and wide as the scene of perilous adventure.

The carriage was heavy; the road, though level, was thick with autumn mud; and the horses made no great speed. Desmond, indeed, durst not urge them too much, for the mist was thickening, making the air even darker than the hour

warranted; and as the roadway had neither hedge nor wall to define it, but was bounded on each side by a ditch, it behoved him to go warily. He had just come to a particularly heavy part of the road where the horses were compelled to walk, when he heard the thud of hoofs some distance behind him. The sound made him vaguely uneasy. It ceased for a moment or two; then he heard it again, and realized that a horse was coming at full gallop. Instinctively he whipped up the horses. The ladies had also heard the sound; and, putting her head out of the window, the elder implored him to drive faster.

Could the two besotted knaves have put the horseman on his track, he wondered. They must believe that the carriage had been run away with, and in their tipsy rage they would seize any means of overtaking him that offered. The horseman might be an inoffensive traveller; on the other hand, he might not. It was best to leave nothing to chance. With a cheery word, to give the ladies confidence, he lashed at the horses and forced the carriage on at a pace that put its clumsy springs to a severe test.

Fortunately the road was straight, and the horses instinctively kept to the middle of the track. But fast as they were now going, Desmond felt that if the horseman was indeed pursuing he would soon be overtaken. He must be prepared for the worst. Gripping the reins hard with his left hand, he dropped the whip for a moment and felt in the box below the seat in the hope of finding a pistol; but it was empty. He whistled under his breath at the discovery: if the pursuer was a "gentleman of the road" his predicament was indeed awkward. The carriage was rumbling and rattling so noisily that he had long since lost the sound of the horse's hoofs behind. He could not pause to learn if the pursuit had ceased; his only course was to drive on. Surely he would soon reach the edge of the heath; there would be houses; every few yards must bring him nearer to the possibility of obtaining help. Thus thinking, he clenched his teeth and lashed the reeking flanks of the horses, which plunged along now at a mad gallop.

Suddenly, above the noise of their hoofs and the rattling of the coach he heard an angry shout. A scream came from the ladies. Heeding neither, Desmond quickly reversed his whip, holding it half-way down the long handle, with the heavy iron-tipped stock outward. The horseman came galloping up on the off side, shouted to Desmond to stop, and without waiting drew level with the box and fired point-blank. But the rapid movement of his horse and the swaying of the carriage forbade him to take careful aim. Desmond felt the wind of the bullet as it whizzed past him. Next moment he leaned slightly sideways, and, never loosening his hold on the reins with his left hand, he brought the weighty butt of his whip with a rapid cut, half sideways, half downwards, upon the horseman's head. The man with a cry swerved in the saddle; almost before Desmond could recover his balance he was amazed to see the horse dash suddenly to the right,

spring across the ditch, and gallop at full speed across the heath.

But he had no time at the moment to speculate on this very easy victory. The horses, alarmed by the pistol shot, were plunging madly, dragging the vehicle perilously near to the ditch on the left hand. Then Desmond's familiarity with animals, gained at so much cost to himself on his brother's farm, bore good fruit. He spoke to the horses soothingly, managed them with infinite tact, and coaxed them into submission. Then he let them have their heads, and they galloped on at speed, pausing only when they reached the turnpike going into Brentford. They were then in a bath of foam, their flanks heaving like to burst. Learning from the turnpike-man that he could obtain a change of horses at the *Bull* inn, Desmond drove there, and was soon upon his way again.

While the change was being made, he obtained from the lady the address in Soho Square where she was staying. The new horses were fresh; the carriage rattled through Gunnersbury, past the turnpike at Hammersmith and through Kensington, and soon after nine o'clock Desmond had the satisfaction of pulling up at the door of Sheriff Soames' mansion in Soho Square.

The door was already open, the rattle of wheels having brought lacqueys with lighted torches to welcome the belated travellers. Torches flamed in the cressets on both sides of the entrance. The hall was filled with servants and members of the household, and in the bustle that ensued when the ladies in their brocades and hoops had entered the house, Desmond saw an opportunity of slipping away. He felt that it was perhaps a little ungracious to go without a word with the ladies; but he was tired; he was unaccustomed to town society; and the service he had been able to render seemed to him so slight that he was modestly eager to efface himself. Leaving the carriage in the hands of one of the lacqueys, with a few words of explanation, he hastened on towards Holborn and the city.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

In which Colonel Clive suffers a defeat hitherto unrecorded; and our hero finds food for reflection.

It was four o'clock, and Tuesday afternoon--the day before the *Good Intent* was to sail from the Pool. Desmond was kicking his heels in his inn, longing for the

morrow. Even now he had not seen the vessel on which he was to set forth in quest of his fortune. She lay in the Pool, but Diggle had found innumerable reasons why Desmond should not visit her until he embarked for good and all. She was loading her cargo; he would be in the way. Captain Barker was in a bad temper; better not see him in his tantrums. The pressgangs were active; they thought nothing of boarding a vessel and seizing on any active young fellow who looked a likely subject for His Majesty's navy. Such were the reasons alleged. And so Desmond had to swallow his impatience and fill in his time as best he might; reading the newspapers, going to see Mr. Garrick and Mistress Kitty Clive at Drury Lane, spending an odd evening at Ranelagh Gardens.

On this Tuesday afternoon he had nothing to do. Diggle was out; Desmond had read the newspapers and glanced at the last number of the World; he had written to his mother--the third letter since his arrival in London; he could not settle to anything. He resolved to go for a walk, as far as St. Paul's, perhaps, and take a last look at the busy streets he was not likely to see again for many a day.

Forth then he issued. The streets were muddy; a mist was creeping up from the river, promising to thicken into a London fog, and the link-boys were already preparing their tow and looking for a rich harvest of coppers ere the night was old. Desmond picked his way through the quagmires of John Street, crossed Crutched Friars, and went up Mark Lane into Fenchurch Street, intending to go by Leadenhall Street and Cornhill into Cheapside.

He had just reached the lower end of Billiter Street, the narrow thoroughfare leading into Leadenhall, when he saw Diggle's tall figure running amain towards him, with another man close behind, apparently in hot pursuit. Diggle caught sight of Desmond at the same moment, and his eyes gleamed as with relief. He quickened his pace.

"Hold this fellow behind me," he panted as he passed, and before Desmond could put a question he was gone.

There was no time for deliberation. Desmond had but just perceived that the pursuer was in the garb of a gentleman and had a broad patch of plaster stretched across his left temple, when the moment for action arrived. Stooping low, he suddenly caught at the man's knees. Down he came heavily, mouthing hearty abuse, and man and boy were on the ground together.

Desmond was up first. He now saw that a second figure was hurrying on from the other end of the street. He was not sure what Diggle demanded of him; whether it was sufficient to have tripped up the pursuer, or whether he must hold him still in play. But by this time the man was also upon his feet; his hat was off, his silk breeches and brown coat with lace ruffles were all bemired. Puffing and blowing, uttering many a round oath such as came freely to the lips of the Englishman of King George the Second's time, he shouted to his friend behind to

come on, and, disregarding Desmond, made to continue his pursuit.

Desmond could but grapple with him.

"Let go, villain!" cried the man, striving to free himself. Desmond clung on; there was a brief struggle, but he was no match in size or strength for his opponent, who was thick-set and of considerable girth. He fell backwards, overborne by the man's weight. His head struck on the road; dazed by the blow he loosened his clutch, and lay for a moment in semi-unconsciousness while the man sprang away.

But he was not so far gone as not to hear a loud shout behind him and near at hand, followed by the tramp of feet.

"Avast there!" The voice was familiar: surely it was Bulger's. "Fair play! Fourteen stone against seven en't odds. Show a leg, mateys."

The big sailor with a dozen of his mates stood full in the path of the irate gentleman, who, seeing himself beset, drew his rapier and prepared to fight his way through. A moment later he was joined by his companion, who had also drawn his rapier. Together the gentlemen stood facing the sailors.

"This is check, Merriman," said the last comer as the seamen, flourishing their hangers menacingly, pressed forward past the prostrate body of Desmond. "The fellow has escaped you; best withdraw at discretion."

"Come on," shouted Bulger, waving his hook. "Bill Bulger en't the man to sheer off from a couple of landlubbers."

As with his mates in line he steadily advanced, the two gentlemen, their lips set, their eyes fixed on the assailants, their rapiers pointed, backed slowly up the street. The noise had brought clerks and merchants to the doors; some one sprang a rattle; there were cries for the watchmen; but no one actively interfered. Meanwhile Desmond had regained his senses, and, still feeling somewhat dizzy, had sat down upon a doorstep, wondering not a little at the pursuit and flight of Diggle and the opportune arrival of the sailors. Everything had happened very rapidly; scarcely two minutes had elapsed since the first onset.

He was still resting when there was a sudden change in the quality of the shouts up street. Hitherto they had been boisterous rallying cries, now they were unmistakably hearty British cheers, expressing nothing but approval and admiration. And they came not merely from the throats of the sailors, but from the now considerable crowd that filled the street. A few moments afterwards he saw the throng part, and through it Bulger marching at the head of his mates, singing lustily. They came opposite to the step on which he sat, and Bulger caught sight of him.

"Blest if it en't our supercargo!" he cried, stopping short.

A shout of laughter broke from the sailors. One of them struck up a song.

Oho! we says good-bye,
But never pipes our eye,
Tho' we leaves Poll, Sue, and Kitty all behind us;
And if we drops our bones
Down along o' Davy Jones,
Why, they'll come and ax the mermaids for to find us.

"And what took ye, Mister Supercargo, to try a fall with the fourteen stoner?"

"Oh, I was helping a friend."

"Ay, an' a friend was helpin' him, an' here's a dozen of us a-helpin' of one supercargo."

"And I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Bulger. But what were you cheering for?"

"Cheerin'! Why, you wouldn't guess. 'Twas General Clive, matey."

"General Clive!"

"Ay, General Clive, him what chased the mounseers out o' Fort St. George with a marlin-spike. I didn't know him at fust, comin' up behind t'other chap; but when I seed that purple coat with the gold lace and the face of him above it I knowed him. In course there was no more fight for us then; 'twas hip-hip hurray and up with our hangers. Clive, he smiled and touched his hat. 'Bulger,' says he, 'you en't much fatter----'"

"Does he know you, then?"

"Know me! In course he does. Wasn't I bo'sun's mate on board the Indiaman as took him east twelve year ago or more? That was afore I got this here button-hook o' mine. Ay, I remember him well, a-trampin' up an' down deck with his hands in his pockets an' his mouth set tight an' his chin on his stock, never speakin' to a soul, in the doldrums if ever a lad was. Why, we all thought there was no more spirit in him than in the old wooden figure-head--leastways, all but me. 'I may be wrong,' says I to old Tinsley the bo'sun, 'I may be wrong,' says I, 'but I be main sure that young sad down-in-the-mouth have got a blazin' fire somewhere in his innards.' Ay, and time showed it. There was a lot of cadets aboard as poked fun at the quiet chap an' talked him over, awinkin' their eyes. From talkin' it got to doin'. One day, goin' to his bunk, he found it all topsy-versy, hair powder on his pillow, dubbin in his shavin' cup, salt pork wropt up in his dressin'-gown. Well, I seed him as he comed on deck, an' his face were a sight to remember, pale as death, but his eyes a-blazin' like live coals in the galley fire. Up he steps to the cadet as was ringleader; how he knowed it I can't tell you, but he was sure of it, same as I always am. 'Sir,' says he, quiet as a lamb, 'I want a word with you.' 'Dear me!' says the cadet, 'have Mr. Clive found his voice at last?' 'Yes, sir,' says

Clive, 'behave, an' something else.' Cook happened to be passin' with a tray; a lady what was squeamish had been havin' her vittles on deck. Mr. Clive cotched up a basin o' pea soup what was too greasy for madam, and in a twink he sets it upside down on the cadet's head. Ay, 'twas a pretty pictur', the greasy yellow stuff runnin' down over his powdered hair an' lace collar an' fine blue coat. My eye! there was a rare old shindy, the cadet cursin' and splutterin', the others laughin' fit to bust 'emselves. The cadet out with his fists, but there, 'twas no manner o' use. Mr. Clive bowled him over like a ninepin till he lay along deck all pea-soup an' gore. There was no more baitin' o' Mr. Clive that voyage. 'Bo'sun,' says I, 'what did I tell you? I may be wrong, but that young Mr. Bob Clive 'll be a handful for the factors in Fort St. George.'"

While this narrative had been in progress, Desmond was walking with Bulger and his mates back towards the river.

"How was it you happened to be hereabouts so early?" asked Desmond. "I didn't expect to see you till to-morrow."

Bulger winked.

"You wouldn't ax if you wasn't a landlubber, meanin' no offence," he said. "'Tis last night ashore. We sailormen has had enough o' *Waterman's Rests* an' suchlike. To tell you the truth, we gave Mr. Toley the slip, and now we be goin' to have a night at the *Crown an' Anchor*."

"What about the pressgang?"

"We takes our chance. They won't press me, sartin sure, 'cos o' my tenterhook here, and I'll keep my weather-eye open, trust me for that."

Here they parted company. Desmond watched the jolly crew as they turned into the Minories, and heard their rollicking chorus:

Ho! when the cargo's shipped,
An' the anchor's neatly tripped,
An' the gals are weepin' bucketfuls o' sorrer,
Why, there's the decks to swab,
An' we en't agoin' to sob,
S'pose the sharks do make a meal of us to-morrer.

At the *Goat and Compasses* Diggle was awaiting him.

"Ha! my friend, you did it as prettily as a man could wish. 'Solitudo aliquid adjuvat,' as Tully somewhere hath it, not foreseeing my case, when solitude would have been my undoing. I thank thee."

"Was the fellow attacking you?" asked Desmond.

"That to be sure was his intention. I was in truth in the very article of peril;

I was blown; my breath was near gone, when at the critical moment up comes a gallant youth--'subvenisti homini jam perdito'--and with dexterous hand stays the enemy in his course."

"But what was it all about? Do you know the man?"

"Ods my life! 'twas a complete stranger, a man, I should guess, of hasty passions and tetchy temper. By the merest accident, at a somewhat crowded part, I unluckily elbowed the man into the kennel, and though I apologized in the handsomest way he must take offence and seek to cut off my life, to extinguish me 'in primo aevo,' as Naso would say. But Atropos was forestalled, my thread of life still falls uncut from Clotho's shuttle; still, still, my boy, I bear on the torch of life unextinguished."

Desmond felt that all this fine phrasing, this copious draught from classical sources, was intended to quench the ardour of his curiosity. Diggle's explanation was very lame; the fury depicted on the pursuer's face could scarcely be due to a mere accidental jostling in the street. And Diggle was certainly not the man to take to his heels on slight occasion. But after all Diggle's quarrels were his own concern. That his past life included secrets Desmond had long suspected, but he was not the first man of birth and education who had fallen into misfortune, and at all events he had always treated Desmond with kindness. So the boy put the matter from his thoughts.

The incident, however, left a sting of vexation behind it. In agreeing to accompany Diggle to the East, Desmond had harboured a vague hope of falling in with Clive and taking service, in however humble a capacity, with him. It vexed him sorely to think that Clive, whose memory for faces, as his recognition of Bulger after twelve years had shown, was very good, might recognize him, should they meet, as the boy who had played a part in what was almost a street brawl. Still, it could not be helped. Desmond comforted himself with the hope that Clive had taken no particular note of him, and, if they should ever encounter, would probably meet him as a stranger.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

In which several weeks are supposed to elapse; and our hero is discovered in the Doldrums.

The *Good Intent* lay becalmed in the Doldrums. There was not wind enough to puff out a candle flame. The sails hung limp and idle from the masts, yet the vessel rolled as in a storm, heaving on a tremendous swell so violently that it would seem her masts must be shaken out of her. The air was sweltering, the sky the colour of burnished copper, out of which the sun beat remorselessly in almost perpendicular beams. Pitch ran from every seam of the decks, great blisters like bubbles rose upon the woodwork; the decks were no sooner swabbed than--presto!--it was as though they had not known the touch of water for an age.

For two weeks she had lain thus. Sometimes the hot day would be succeeded by a night of terrible storm, thunder crashing around, the whole vault above lacerated by lightning, and rain pouring, as it were out of the fissures, in sheets. But in a day all traces of the storm would disappear, and if, meanwhile, a sudden breath of wind had carried the vessel a few knots on her southward course, the hopes thus raised would prove illusory, and once more she would lie on a sea of molten lead, or, still worse, would be rocked on a long swell that had all the discomforts of a gale without its compensating excitement.

The tempers of officers and crew had gone from bad to worse. The officers snapped and snarled at one another, and treated the men with even more than the customary brutality of the merchant marine of those days. The crew, lounging about half-naked on the decks, seeking what shelter they could get from the pitiless sun, with little to do and no spirit to do anything, quarrelled among themselves, growling at the unnecessary tasks set them merely to keep them from flying at each others' throats.

The *Good Intent* was a fine three-masted vessel of nearly 400 tons, large for those days, though the new East Indiamen approached 500 tons. When her keel was laid for the Honourable East India Company some twenty years earlier, she had been looked on as one of the finest merchant vessels afloat; but the buffeting of wind and wave in a dozen voyages to the eastern seas, and the more insidious and equally destructive attacks of worms and dry-rot, had told upon her timbers. She had been sold off and purchased by Captain Barker, who was one of the class known as "interlopers," men who made trading voyages to the East Indies on their own account, running the risk of their vessels being seized and themselves penalized for infringing the Company's monopoly. She was now filled with a miscellaneous cargo: wine in chests, beer and cider in bottles, hats, worsted stockings, wigs, small shot, lead, iron, knives, glass, hubble-bubbles, cochineal, sword-blades, toys, coarse cloth, woollen goods--anything that would find a market among the European merchants, the native princes, or the trading classes of India. There was also a large consignment of muskets and ammunition. When Desmond asked the second mate where they were going, the reply was that if he asked no questions he would be told no lies.

On this sultry afternoon a group of seamen, clad in nothing but shirt and breeches, were lolling, lying, crouching on the deck forward, circled around Bulger. Seated on an upturned tub, he was busily engaged in baiting a hook. Tired of the "Irish horse" and salt pork that formed the staple of the sailors' food, he was taking advantage of the calm to fish for bonitos, a large fish over two feet long, the deadly enemy of the beautiful flying-fish that every now and then fell panting upon the deck in their mad flight from marine foes. The bait was made to resemble the flying-fish itself, the hook being hidden by white rag-stuffing, with feathers pricked-in to counterfeit spiked fins.

As the big seaman deftly worked with iron hook and right hand, he spun yarns for the delectation of his mates. They chewed tobacco, listened, laughed, sneered, as their temper inclined them. Only one of the group gave him rapt and undivided attention--a slim youth, with hollow sunburnt cheeks, long bleached hair, and large gleaming eyes. His neck and arms were bare, and the colour of boiled lobsters; but, unlike the rest, he had no tattoo-marks pricked into his skin. His breeches were tatters, his striped shirt was covered with parti-coloured darns.

"Ay, as I was saying," said Bulger, "'twas in these latitudes, on my last voyage but three. I was in a Bristol ship a-carryin' of slaves from Guinea to the plantations. Storms!--I never seed such storms nowhere; and, contrairywise, calms enough to make a Quaker sick. In course the water was short, an' scurvy come aboard, an' 'twas a hammock an' a round shot for one or other of us every livin' day. As reg'lar as the mornin' watch the sharks came for their breakfast; we could see 'em comin' from all p'ints o' the compass; an' sure as seven bells struck there they was, ten deep, with jaws wide open, like Parmiter's there when there's a go of grog to be sarved out. We was all like the livin' skellington at Bartlemy Fair, and our teeth droppin' out that fast, they pattered like hailstones on the deck."

"How did you stick 'em in again?" interrupted Parmiter, anxious to get even with Bulger for the allusion to his gaping jaw. He was a thick-set, ugly fellow, his face seamed with scars, his mouth twisted, his ears dragged at the lobes by heavy brass rings.

"With glue made out of albicores we caught, to be sure. Well, as I was saying, we was so weak there wasn't a man aboard could reach the maintop, an' the man at the wheel had two men to hold him up. Things was so, thus, an' in such case, when, about eight bells one arternoon, the look-out at the mast-head----"

"Thought you couldn't climb? How'd he get there?" said the same sceptic.

"Give me time, Parmiter, and you'll know all about the hows an' whys, notwithstanding and sobeits. He'd been there for a week, for why? 'cos he couldn't get down. We passed him up a quarter-pint o' water and a biscuit or two every day by a halyard. Well, as I was sayin', all at once the look-out calls down, 'Land ho!'--leastways he croaked it, 'cos what with weakness and little water our

throats was as dry as last year's biscuit. 'Where away?' croaks first mate, which I remember his name was Tonking. And there, sure enough, we seed a small island, which it might be a quarter-mile long. Now, mind you, we hadn't made a knot for three weeks. How did that island come there so sudden like? In course, it must ha' come up from the bottom o' the sea. And as we was a-lookin' at it we seed it grow, mateys--long spits o' land shootin' out this side, that side, and t'other side--and the whole concarn begins to move towards us, comin' on, hand over hand, slow, dead slow, but sure and steady. Our jaws were just a-droppin' arter our teeth when fust mate busts out in a laugh; by thunder, I remember that there laugh to-day! 'twas like--well, I don't know what 'twas like, if not the scrapin' of a handsaw; an' says he, 'By Neptune, 'tis a darned monstrous squid!' And, sure enough, that was what it was, a squid as big round as the Isle o' Wight, with arms that ud reach from Wapping Stairs to Bugsby Marshes, and just that curly shape. An' what was more, 'twas steerin' straight for us. Ay, mateys, 'twas a horrible moment!"

The seamen, even Parmiter the scoffer, were listening open-mouthed when a hoarse voice broke the spell, cutting short Bulger's story and dispersing the group.

"Here you, Burke you, up aloft and pay the topmast with grease. I'll have no lazy lubbers aboard my ship, I tell you. I've got no use for nobody too good for his berth. No Jimmy Duffs for me! Show a leg, or, by heavens, I'll show you a rope's end and make my mark--mind that, my lad!"

Captain Barker turned to the man at his side.

"'Twas an ill turn you did me and the ship's company, Mr. Diggle, bringing this useless lubber aboard."

"It does appear so, captain," said Diggle sorrowfully. "But 'tis his first voyage, sir: discipline--a little discipline!"

Meanwhile Desmond, without a word, had moved away to obey orders. He had long since found the uselessness of protest. Diggle had taken him on board the *Good Intent* an hour before sailing. He left him to himself until the vessel was well out in the mouth of the Thames, and then came with a rueful countenance and explained that, after all his endeavours, the owners had absolutely refused to accept so youthful a fellow as supercargo. Desmond felt his cheeks go pale.

"What am I to be, then?" he asked quietly.

"Well, my dear boy, Captain Barker is rather short of apprentices, and he has no objection to taking you in place of one if you will make yourself useful. He is a first-rate seaman. You will imbibe a vast deal of useful knowledge and gain a free passage, and when we reach the Indies I shall be able, I doubt not, by means of my connexions, to assist you in the first steps of what, I trust, will prove a successful career."

"Then who is supercargo?"

"Unluckily that greatness has been thrust upon me. Unluckily, I say; for the

office is not one that befits a former fellow of King's College at Cambridge. Yet there is an element of good luck in it, too; for, as you know, my fortunes were at a desperately low ebb, and the emoluments of this office, while not great, will stand me in good stead when we reach our destination, and enable me to set you, my dear boy--to borrow from the vernacular--on your legs."

"You have deceived me, then!"

"Nay, nay, you do bear me hard, young man. To be disappointed is not the same thing as to be deceived. True, you are not, as I hoped, supercargo, but the conditions are not otherwise altered. You wished to go to India--well, Zephyr's jocund breezes, as Catullus hath it, will waft you thither: we are flying to the bright cities of the East. No fragile bark is this, carving a dubious course through the main, as Seneca, I think, puts it. No, 'tis an excellent vessel, with an excellent captain, who will steer a certain course, who fears not the African blast nor the grisly Hyades nor the fury of Notus----"

Desmond did not wait the end of Diggle's peroration. It was too late to repine. The vessel was already rounding the Foreland, and though he was more than half convinced that he had been decoyed on board on false pretences, he could not divine any motive on Diggle's part, and hoped that his voyage would be not much less pleasant than he had anticipated.

But even before the *Good Intent* made the Channel he was woefully undeceived. His first interview with the captain opened his eyes. Captain Barker was a small, thin, sandy man, with a large upper lip that met the lower in a straight line, a lean nose, and eyes perpetually bloodshot. His manner was that of a bully of the most brutal kind. He browbeat his officers, cuffed and kicked his men, in his best days a martinet, in his worst a madman. The only good point about him was that he never used the cat, which, as Bulger said, was a mercy.

"Humph!" he said when Desmond was presented to him. "You're him, are you? Well, let me tell you this, my lad: the ship's boy on board this 'ere ship have got to do what he's bid, and no mistake about it. If he don't, I'll make him. Now you go for'ard into the galley and scrape the slush off the cook's pans; quick's the word."

From that day Desmond led a dog's life. He found that as ship's boy he was at the beck and call of the whole company. The officers, with the exception of Mr. Toley, the melancholy first mate, took their cue from the captain; and Mr. Toley, as a matter of policy, never sided with him openly. The men resented his superior manners and the fact that he was socially above them. The majority of the seamen were even more ruffianly than the specimens he had seen at the *Waterman's Rest*--the scum of Wapping and Rotherhithe. His only real friend on board was Bulger, who helped him to master the many details of a sailor's work, and often protected him against the ill-treatment of his mates; and, in spite of his one arm, Bulger was

a power to be reckoned with.

At the best of times the life of a sailor was hard, and Desmond found it at first almost intolerable. Irregular sleep on an uncomfortable hammock, wedged in with the other members of the crew, bad food, and over-exertion told upon his frame. From the moment when all hands were piped to lash hammocks to the moment when the signal was given for turning in, it was one long round of thankless drudgery. But he proved himself to be very quick and nimble. Before long, no one could lash his hammock with the seven turns in a shorter time than he. After learning the work on the mainsails and try-sails he was sent to practise the more acrobatic duties in the tops, and when two months had passed, no one excelled him in quickness aloft. If his work had been confined to the ordinary seaman's duties he would have been fairly content, for there is always a certain pleasure in accomplishment, and the consciousness of growing skill and power was some compensation for the hardships he had to undergo. But he had to do dirty work for the cook, clean out the styes of the captain's pigs, swab the lower deck, sometimes descend on errands for one or other to the nauseous hold.

Perhaps the badness of the food was the worst evil to a boy accustomed to plain but good country fare. The burgoo or oatmeal gruel served at breakfast made him sick; he knew how it had been made in the cook's dirty pans. The "Irish horse" and salt pork for dinner soon became distasteful; it was not in the best condition when brought aboard, and before long it became putrid. The strong cheese for supper was even more horrible. He lived for the most part on the tough sea-biscuit of mixed wheat and pea-flour, and on the occasional duffs of flour boiled with fat, which did duty as pudding. For drink he had nothing but small beer; the water in the wooden casks was full of green, grassy, slimy things. But the fresh sea-air seemed to be a food itself; and though Desmond became lean and hollow-cheeked, his muscles developed and hardened. Little deserving Captain Barker's ill-tempered abuse, he became handy in many ways on board, and proved to be the possessor of a remarkably keen pair of eyes.

When, in obedience to the captain's orders, he was greasing the mast, his attention was caught by three or four specks on the horizon.

"Sail ho!" he called to the officer of the watch.

"Where away?" was the reply.

"On the larboard quarter, sir; three or four sail, I think."

The officer at once mounted the shrouds and took a long look at the specks Desmond pointed out, while the crew below crowded to the bulwarks and eagerly strained their eyes in the same direction.

"What do you make of 'em, Mr. Sunman?" asked the captain.

"Three or four sail, sir, sure enough. They are hull down; there's not a doubt but they're bringing the wind with 'em."

"Hurray!" shouted the men, overjoyed at the prospect of moving at last.

In a couple of hours the strangers had become distinctly visible, and the first faint puffs of the approaching breeze caused the sails to flap lazily against the yards. Then the canvas filled out, and at last, after a fortnight's delay, the *Good Intent* began to slip through the water at three or four knots.

The wind freshened during the night, and next morning the *Good Intent* was bowling along under single-reefed topsails. The ships sighted the night before had disappeared, to the evident relief of Captain Barker. Whether they were Company's vessels or privateers he had no wish to come to close quarters with them.

After breakfast, when the watch on deck were busy about the rigging or the guns, or the hundred and one details of a sailor's work, the rest of the crew had the interval till dinner pretty much to themselves. Some slept, some reeled out yarns to their messmates, others mended their clothes. It happened one day that Desmond, sitting in the forecastle among the men of his mess, was occupied in darning a pair of breeches for Parmiter. Darning was the one thing he could not do satisfactorily; and one of the men, quizzically observing his well-meant but really ludicrous attempts, at last caught up the garment and held it aloft, calling his mates' attention to it with a shout of laughter.

Parmiter chanced to be coming along at the moment. Hearing the laugh, and seeing the pitiable object of it, he flew into a rage, sprang at Desmond, and knocked him down.

"What do you mean, you clumsy young lubber you," he cried, "by treating my smalls like that? I'll brain you, sure as my name's Parmiter!"

Desmond had already suffered not a little at Parmiter's hands. His endurance was at an end. Springing up with flaming cheeks he leapt towards the bully, and putting in practice the methods he had learnt in many a hard-fought mill at Mr. Burslem's school, he began to punish the offender. His muscles were in good condition; Parmiter was too much addicted to grog to make a steady pugilist; and though he was naturally much the stronger man, he was totally unable to cope with his agile antagonist. A few rounds settled the matter; Parmiter had to confess that he had had enough, and Desmond, flinging his breeches to him, sat down tingling among his mates, who greeted the close of the fight with spontaneous and unrestrained applause.

Next day Parmiter was in the foretop splicing the forestay. Desmond was walking along the deck when suddenly he felt his arm clutched from behind, and he was pulled aside so violently by Bulger's hook that he stumbled and fell at full length. At the same moment something struck the deck with a heavy thud.

"By thunder! 'twas a narrow shave," said Bulger. "See that, matey?"

Looking in the direction Bulger pointed, he saw that the foretopsail sheet

block had fallen on deck, within an inch of where he would have been but for the intervention of Bulger's hook. Glancing aloft, he saw Parmiter grinning down at him.

"Hitch that block to a halyard, youngster," said the man.

Desmond was on the point of refusing; the man, he thought, might at least have apologised: but reflecting that a refusal would entail a complaint to the captain, and subsequent punishment, he bit his lips, fastened the block, and went on his way.

"'Tis my belief 'twas no accident," said Bulger afterwards. "I may be wrong, but Parmiter bears a grudge against you. And he and that there Mr. Diggle is too thick by half. I never could make out why Diggle diddled you about that supercargo business; he don't mean you no kindness, you may be sure; and when you see two villains like him and Parmiter puttin' their heads together, look out for squalls, that's what I say."

Desmond was inclined to laugh; the idea seemed preposterous.

"Why are you so suspicious of Mr. Diggle?" he said. "He has not kept his promise, that's true, and I am sorry enough I ever listened to him. But that doesn't prove him to be an out-and-out villain. I've noticed that you keep out of his way. Do you know anything of him? Speak out plainly, man."

"Well, I'll tell you what I knows about him." He settled himself against the mast, gave a final polish to his hook with holy-stone, and, using the hook every now and then to punctuate his narrative, began: "Let me see, 'twas a matter o' three years ago. I was bosun on the *Swallow*, a spanker she was, chartered by the Company, London to Calcutta. There was none of the doldrums that trip, dodged 'em fair an' square; a topsail breeze to the Cape, and then the fust of the monsoon to the Hugli. We lay maybe a couple of months at Calcutta, when what should I do but take aboard a full dose of the cramp, just as the *Swallow* was in a manner of speakin' on the wing. Not but what it sarved me right, for what business had I at my time of life to be wastin' shore-leave by poppin' at little dicky birds in the dirty slimy jheels, as they call 'em, round about Calcutta! Well, I was put ashore, as was on'y natural, and 'twas a marvel I pulled through--for it en't many as take the cramp in Bengal and live to tell of it. The Company, I'll say that for 'em, was very kind; I had the best o' nussin' and vittles; but when I found my legs again there I was, as one might say, high and dry, for there was no Company's ship ready to sail. So I got leave to sign on a country ship, bound for Canton; and we dropped down the Hugli with enough opium on board to buy up the lord mayor and a baker's dozen of aldermen.

"Nearly half a mile astern was three small country ships, such as might creep round the coast to Chittagong, dodgin' the pirates o' the Sandarbands if they was lucky, and gettin' their weazands slit if they wasn't. They drew less water than

us, and was generally handier in the river, which is uncommon full o' shoals and sandbanks; but for all that I remember they was still maybe half a mile astern when we dropped anchor--anchors I should say--for the night, some way below Diamond Harbour. But to us white men the ways o' these Moors[#] is always a bag o' mystery, and as seamen they en't anyhow of much account. Well, it might be about seven bells, and my watch below, when I was woke by a most tremenjous bangin' and hullabaloo. We tumbles up mighty sharp, and well we did, for there was one of these country fellows board and board with us, and another foulin' our hawser. Their grapnels came whizzin' aboard; but the first lot couldn't take a hold nohow, and she dropped down stream. That gave us a chance to be ready for the other. She got a grip of us and held on like a shark what grabs you by the legs. But pistols and pikes had been sarved out, and when they came bundlin' over into the foc'sle, we bundled 'em back into the Hugli, and you may be sure they wasn't exactly seaworthy when they got there. They was a mixed lot; that we soon found out by their manner o' swearin' as they slipped by the board, for although there was Moors among 'em most of 'em was Frenchies or Dutchmen, and considerin' they wasn't Englishmen they made a good fight of it. But over they went, until only a few was left; and we was just about to finish 'em off, when another country ship dropped alongside, and before we knew where we was a score of yellin' ruffians was into the waist and rushin' us in the stern-sheets, as you might say. We had to fight then, by thunder! we did.

[#] The natives of India were thus called by Englishmen in the 18th century.

"The odds was against us now, and we was catchin' it from two sides. But our blood was up, and we knew what to expect if they beat us. 'Twas the Hugli for every man Jack of us, and no mistake. There was no orders, every man for himself, with just enough room and no more to see the mounseer in front of him. Some of us--I was one of 'em--fixed the flints of the pirates for'ard, while the rest faced round and kept the others off. Then we went at 'em, and as they couldn't all get at us at the same time owing to the deck being narrow, the odds was not so bad arter all. 'Twas now hand to hand, fist to fist, one for you and one for me; you found a Frenchman and stuck to him till you finished him off, or he finished you, as the case might be, in a manner of speakin'. Well, I found one lanky chap--he was number four that night, and all in ten minutes as it were; I jabbed a pike at him, and missed, for it was hard to keep footin' on the wet deck, though the wet was not Hugli water; thick as it is, this was thicker--and he fired a pistol at me by way of thank you. I saw his figure-head in the flash, and I shan't forget it either,

for he left me this to remember him by, though I didn't know it at the time."

Here Bulger held up the iron hook that did duty for his left forearm. Then, glancing cautiously round, he added in a whisper:

"'Twas Diggle--or I'm a Dutchman. That was my fust meetin' with him. Of course, I'm in a way helpless now, being on the ship's books, and he in a manner of speakin' an officer; but one of these days there'll be a reckonin', or my name en't Bulger."

The sailor brought down his fist with a resounding whack on the scuttle butt, threatening to stave in the top of the barrel.

"And how did the fight end?" asked Desmond.

"We drove 'em back bit by bit, and fairly wore 'em down. They warn't all sailormen, or we couldn't have done it, for they had the numbers; but an Englishman on his own ship is worth any two furriners--aye, half a dozen some do say, though I wouldn't go so far as that myself--and at the last some of them turned tail an' bolted back. The ship's boy, what was in the shrouds, saw 'em on the run and set up a screech: 'Hooray! hooray!' That was all we wanted. We hoorayed too; and went at 'em in such a slap-bang go-to-glory way that in a brace of shakes there warn't a Frenchman, a Dutchman, nor a Moor on board. They cut the grapnels and floated clear, and next mornin' we saw 'em on their beam ends on a sandbank a mile down the river. That's how I fust come acrost Mr. Diggle; I may be wrong, but I says it again: look out for squalls."

For some days the wind held fair, and the ship being now in the main track of the trades, all promised well for a quick run to the Cape. But suddenly there was a change; a squall struck the vessel from the south-west. Captain Barker, catching sight of Desmond and a seaman near at hand, shouted:

"Furl the top-gallant sail, you two. Now show a leg, or, by thunder, the masts will go by the board."

Springing up the shrouds on the weather side, Desmond was quickest aloft. He crawled out on the yard, the wind threatening every moment to tear him from his dizzy rocking perch, and began with desperate energy to furl the straining canvas. It was hard work, and but for the development of his muscles during the past few months, and a naturally cool head, the task would have been beyond his powers. But setting his teeth and exerting his utmost strength, he accomplished his share of it as quickly as the able seaman on the lee yard.

The sail was half furled when all at once the mast swung through a huge arc; the canvas came with tremendous force against the cross-trees; and Desmond, flung violently outwards, found himself swinging in mid-air, clinging desperately to the leech of the sail. With a convulsive movement he grasped at a loose gasket above him, and catching a grip wound it twice or thrice round his arm. The strain was intense; the gasket was thin and cut deeply into the flesh; he knew that should

it give way nothing could save him. So he hung, the wind howling around him, the yards rattling, the boisterous sea below heaving as if to clutch him and drag him to destruction. A few seconds passed, every one of which seemed an eternity. Then through the noise he heard shouts on deck. The vessel suddenly swung over, and Desmond's body inclined towards instead of from the mast. Shooting out his hand he caught at the yard, seized it, and held on, though it seemed that his arm must be wrenched from the socket. In a few moments he succeeded in clambering on to the yard, where he clung, endeavouring to regain his breath and his senses.

Then he completed his job, and with a sense of unutterable relief slid down to the deck. A strange sight met his eyes. Bulger and Parmiter were lying side by side; there was blood on the deck; and Captain Barker stood over them with a martin spike, his eyes blazing, his face distorted with passion. In consternation Desmond slipped out of the way, and asked the first man he met for an explanation.

It appeared that Parmiter, who was at the wheel when the squall struck the ship, had put her in stays before the sail was furled, with the result that she heeled over and Desmond narrowly escaped being flung into the sea. Seeing the boy's plight Bulger had sprung forward and, knocking Parmiter from the wheel, had put the vessel on the other tack, thus giving Desmond the one chance of escape which, fortunately, he had been able to seize. The captain had been incensed to a blind fury, first with Parmiter for acting without orders and then with Bulger for interfering with the man at the wheel. In a paroxysm of madness he attacked both men with a spike; the ship was left without a helmsman, and nothing but the promptitude of the melancholy mate, who had rushed forward and taken the abandoned wheel himself, had saved the vessel from the imminent risk of carrying away her masts.

Later in the day, when the squall and the captain's rage had subsided, the incident was talked over by a knot of seamen in the foc's'le.

"You may say what you like," said one, "but I hold to it that Parmiter meant to knock young Burke into the sea. For why else did he put the ship in stays? He en't a fool, en't Parmiter."

"Ay," said another, "and arter that there business with the block, eh? One and one make two; that's twice the youngster has nigh gone to Davy Jones through Parmiter, and it en't in reason that sich-like things should allers happen to the same party."

"But what's the reason?" asked a third. "What call has Parmiter to have such a desperate spite against Burke? He got a lickin', in course, but what's a lickin' to a Englishman? Rot it all, the youngster en't a bad matey. He've led a dog's life, that he have, and I've never heard a grumble, nary one; have you?"

"True," said the first. "And I tell you what it is. I believe Bulger's in the right

of it, and 'tis all along o' that there Diggle, hang him! He's too perlite by half, with his smile and his fine lingo and all. And what's he keep his hand wropt up in that there velvet mitten thing for? I'd like to know that. There's summat mortal queer about Diggle, mark my words, and we'll find it out if we live long enough."

"Wasn't it Diggle brought Burke aboard?"

"Course it was; that's what proves it, don't you see? He stuffs him up as he's to be supercargo; call that number one. He brings him aboard and makes him ship's boy: that's number two. He looks us all up and down with those rat's eyes of his, and thinks we're a pretty ugly lot, and Parmiter the ugliest; how's that for number three? Then he makes hisself sweet to Parmiter; I've seed him more'n once; that's number four. Then there's that there block: five; and to-day's hanky-panky: six; and it wants one more to make seven, and that's the perfect number, I've heard tell, 'cos o' the Seven Champions o' Christendom."

"I guess you've reasoned that out mighty well," drawled the melancholy voice of Mr. Toley, who had come up unseen and heard the last speech. "Well, I'll give you number seven."

"Thunder and blazes, sir, he en't bin and gone and done it already!"

"No, he en't. Number seven is, be kind o' tender with young Burke. Count them words. He's had enough kicks. That's all."

And the melancholy man went away as silently as he had come.

CHAPTER THE NINTH

In which the *Good Intent* makes a running fight; and Mr. Toley makes a suggestion.

Making good sailing, the *Good Intent* reached Saldanhas Bay, where she put in for a few necessary repairs, then safely rounded the Cape, and after a short stay at Johanna, one of the Comoro Islands, taking in fresh provisions there, set sail for the Malabar coast. The wind blew steadily from the south-west, and she ran merrily before it.

During this part of the voyage Desmond found his position somewhat improved. His pluck had won the rough admiration of the men; Captain Barker was not so constantly chevying him; and Mr. Toley showed a more active interest in

him, teaching him the use of the sextant and quadrant, how to take the altitude of the sun, and many other matters important in navigation.

It was the third week of April, and the monsoon having begun, Captain Barker expected before long to sight the Indian coast. One morning, about two bells, the look-out reported a small vessel on the larboard bow, labouring heavily. The captain took a long look at it through his perspective glass, anc made out that it was a two-masted grab; the mainmast was gone.

"Odds bobs," he said to Mr. Toley, "'tis strange to meet a grab so far out at sea. We'll run down to it."

"What is a grab?" asked Desmond of Bulger, when the news had circulated through the ship's company.

"Why, that's a grab, sure enough. I en't a good hand at pictur' paintin'; we're runnin' square for the critter, and then you'll see for yourself. This I'll say, that you don't see 'em anywheres in partickler but off the Malabar coast."

Desmond was soon able to take stock of the vessel. It was broad in proportion to its length, narrowing from the middle to the end, and having a projecting prow like the old-fashioned galleys of which he had seen pictures. The prow was covered with a deck, level with the main deck of the vessel, but with a bulkhead between this and the forecastle.

"En't she pitchin'!" remarked Bulger, standing by Desmond's side. "You couldn't expect nothing else of a craft built that shape. Look at the water pourin' off her; why, I may be wrong, but I'll lay my best breeches she's a-founderin'."

As usual, Bulger was right. When the grab was overhauled, the men on board, dark-skinned Marathas with very scanty clothing, made signs that they were in distress.

"Throw her into the wind," shouted the captain.

Mr. Toley at the wheel put the helm down, the longboat was lowered, and with some difficulty, owing to the heavy sea, the thirty men on the grab were taken off. As they came aboard the *Good Intent*, Diggle, who was leaning over the bulwarks, suddenly straightened himself, smiled, and moved towards the taffrail. One of the newcomers, a fine muscular fellow, seeing Diggle approaching, stood for a moment in surprise, then salaamed. The Englishman said something in the stranger's tongue, and grasped his hand with the familiarity of old friendship.

"You know the man, Mr. Diggle?" said the captain.

"Yes, truly. The Gentoos and I are in a sense comrades in arms. His name is Hybati; he's a Maratha."

"What's he jabbering about?"

The man was talking rapidly and earnestly.

"He says, captain," returned Diggle with a smile, "that he hopes you will send and fetch the crew's rice on board. They won't eat our food--afraid of losing

caste."

"I'll be hanged if I launch the long-boat again. The grab won't live another five minutes in this sea, and I wouldn't risk two of my crew against a hundred of these dirty Moors."

"They'll starve otherwise, captain."

"Well, let 'em starve. I won't have any nonsense aboard my ship. Beggars mustn't be choosers, and if the heathen can't eat good honest English vittles they don't deserve to eat at all."

Diggle smiled and explained to Hybati that his provisions must be left to their fate. Even as he spoke a heavy sea struck the vessel athwart, and amid cries from the Marathas she heeled over and sank.

When the strangers had dried themselves, Diggle inquired of Hybati how he came to be in his present predicament. The Maratha explained that he had been in command of Angria's fortress of Suvarndrug, which was so strong that he had believed it able to withstand all attacks. But one day a number of vessels of the East India Company's fleet had appeared between the mainland and the island on which the fortress was situated, and had begun a bombardment which soon reduced the parapets to ruins. The chief damage had been done by an English ship. Hybati and his men had made the best defence they could, but the gunners were shot down by musket fire from the round-tops of the enemy, and when a shell set fire to a thatched house within the fort, the garrison were too much alarmed to attempt to extinguish the flames; the blaze spread, a powder magazine blew up, and the inhabitants, with the greater part of the soldiers, fled to the shore, and tried to make their escape in eight large boats. Hybati had kept up the fight for some time longer, hoping to receive succour; but under cover of the fire of the ships the English commodore landed half his seamen, who rushed up to the gate, and, cutting down the sally-port with their axes, forced their way in.

Seeing that the game was up, Hybati fled with thirty of his men, and was lucky in pushing off in the grab unobserved by the enemy. The winds, however, proving contrary, the vessel had been blown northward along the coast and then driven far out to sea. With the breaking of the monsoon a violent squall had dismasted the grab and shattered her bulkhead; she was continually shipping water, and, as the sahib saw, was at the point of sinking when the English ship came up.

Such was the Maratha's story, as by and by it became common property on board the *Good Intent*. Of all the crew Desmond was perhaps the most interested. To the others there was nothing novel in the sight of the Indians; but to him they stood for romance, the embodiment of all the tales he had heard and all the dreams he had dreamed of this wonderful country in the East. He was now assured that he was actually within reach of his desired haven; and he hoped shortly to see an end of the disappointments and hardships, the toils and distresses, of the long

voyage.

He was eager to learn more of these Marathas, and their fortress, and the circumstances of the recent fight. Bulger was willing to tell all he knew; but his information was not very exact, and Desmond did not hear the full story till long after.

The Malabar coast had long been the haunt of Maratha pirates, who interfered greatly with the native trade between India and Arabia and Persia. In defence of the interests of his Mohammedan subjects the Mogul emperor at length, in the early part of the eighteenth century, fitted out a fleet, under the command of an admiral known as the Sidi. But there happened to be among the Marathas at that time a warrior of great daring and resource, one Kunaji Angria. This man first defeated the Sidi, then, in the insolence of victory, revolted against his own sovereign, and set up as an independent ruler. By means of a well-equipped fleet of grabs and gallivats he made himself master of place after place along the coast, including the Maratha fortress at Suvarndrug and the Portuguese fort of Gheria. His successors, who adopted in turn the dynastic name of Angria, followed up Kunaji's conquest, until by the year 1750 the ruling Angria was in possession of a strip of territory on the mainland a hundred and eighty miles long and about forty broad, together with many small adjacent islands.

For the defence of this little piratical state Angria's Marathas constructed a number of forts, choosing admirable positions and displaying no small measure of engineering skill. From these strongholds they made depredations by sea and land, not only upon their native neighbours, but also upon the European traders, English, Dutch, and Portuguese; swooping down on unprotected merchant vessels and even presuming to attack warships. Several expeditions had been directed against them, but always in vain; and when in 1754 the chief of that date, Tulaji Angria, known to Europeans as the Pirate, burnt two large Dutch vessels of fifty and thirty-six guns respectively, and captured a smaller one of eighteen guns, he boasted in his elation that he would soon be master of the Indian seas.

But a term was about to be put to his insolence and his depredations. On March 22, 1755, Commodore William James, commander of the East India Company's marine force, set sail from Bombay in the *Protector* of forty-four guns, with the *Swallow* of sixteen guns, and two bomb vessels. With the assistance of a Maratha fleet he had attacked the island fortress of Suvarndrug, and captured it, as Hybati had related. A few days afterwards another of the Pirate's fortresses, the island of Bancoote, six miles north of Suvarndrug, surrendered. The Maratha rajah, Ramaji Punt, delighted with these successes against fortified places which had for nearly fifty years been deemed impregnable, offered the English commodore an immense sum of money to proceed against others of Angria's forts; but the monsoon approaching, the commodore was recalled to Bombay.

The spot at which the *Good Intent* had fallen in with the sinking grab was about eighty miles from the Indian coast, and Captain Barker expected to sight land next day. No one was more delighted at the prospect than Desmond. Leaving out of account the miseries of the long voyage, he felt that he was now within reach of the goal of his hopes. The future was all uncertain; he was no longer inclined to trust his fortunes to Diggle, for though he could not believe that the man had deliberately practised against his life, he had with good reason lost confidence in him, and what he had learnt from Bulger threw a new light on his past career.

One thing puzzled him. If the Pirate was such a terror to unprotected ships, and strong enough to attack several armed vessels at once, why was Captain Barker running into the very jaws of the enemy? In her palmy days as an East Indiaman the *Good Intent* had carried a dozen nine pounders on her upper deck and six on the quarter-deck; and Bulger had said that under a stout captain she had once beaten off near Surat half a dozen three-masted grabs and a score of gallivats from the pirate stronghold at Gheria. But now she had only half a dozen guns all told, and even had she possessed the full armament there were not men enough to work them, for her complement of forty men was only half what it had been when she sailed under the Company's flag.

Desmond confided his puzzlement to Bulger. The seaman laughed.

"Why, bless 'ee, we en't a-goin' to run into no danger. Trust Cap'n Barker for that. You en't supercargo, to be sure; but who do you think them guns and round shots in the hold be for? Why, the Pirate himself. And he'll pay a good price for 'em too."

"Do you mean to say that English merchants supply Angria with weapons to fight against their own countrymen?"

"Well, blest if you en't a' innocent. In course they do. The guns en't always fust-class metal, to be sure; but what's the odds? The interlopers ha' got to live."

"I don't call that right. It's not patriotic."

"Patry what?"

"Patriotic--a right way of thinking of one's own country. An Englishman isn't worth the name who helps England's enemies."

Bulger looked at him in amazement. The idea of patriotism was evidently new to him.

"I'll have to put that there notion in my pipe and smoke it," he said. "I'd fight any mounseer, or Dutchman, or Portuguee as soon as look at him, 'tis on'y natural; but if a mounseer likes to give me twopence for a thing what's worth a penny--why, I'll say thank 'ee and ax him--leastways if there's any matey by as knows the lingo--to buy another."

Shortly after dawn next morning the look-out reported four vessels to wind-

ward. From their appearance Captain Barker at once concluded that two were Company's ships, with an escort of a couple of grabs. As he was still scanning them he was joined by Diggle, with whom he entered into conversation.

"They're making for Bombay, I reckon," said the captain.

"I take it we don't wish to come to close quarters with them, Barker?"

"By thunder, no! But if we hold our present course we're bound to pass within hailing distance. Better put 'em off the scent."

He altered the vessel's course a point or two with the object of passing to windward of the strangers, as if steering for the Portuguese port of Goa.

"They're running up their colours," remarked Diggle half an hour later.

"British, as I thought. We'll hoist Portuguese."

A minute or two later a puff of smoke was observed to sally from the larger of the two grabs, followed in a few seconds by the boom of the gun.

"A call to us to heave-to," said Bulger in answer to Desmond's inquiry. "The unbelievin' critters thinks that Portuguee rag is all my eye."

But the *Good Intent* was by this time to windward of the vessels, and Captain Barker, standing on the quarter-deck, paid no heed to the signal. After a short interval another puff came from the deck of the grab, and a round shot plunged into the sea a cable's length from the *Good Intent's* bows, the grab at the same time hauling her wind and preparing to alter her course in pursuit. This movement was at once copied by the other three vessels, but being at least half a mile ahead of the grab that had fired, they were a long distance astern when the chase--for chase it was to be--began.

Captain Barker watched the grab with the eyes of a lynx. The *Good Intent* had run out of range while the grab was being put about; but the captain knew very well that the pursuer could sail much closer to the wind than his own vessel, and that his only chance was to beat off the leading boat before the others had time to come up.

It required very little at any time to put Captain Barker into a rage, and his demeanour was watched now with different feelings by different members of his crew. Diggle alone appeared unconcerned; he was smiling as he lolled against the mast.

"They'll fire at me, will they?" growled the captain with a curse. "And chase me, will they? By jiminy, they shall sink me before I surrender!"

"'Degeneres animos timor arguit,'" quoted Diggle, smiling.

"Argue it? I'll be hanged if I argue it! They're not King's ships to take it on 'emselves to stop me on the high seas! If the Company wants to prevent me from honest trading in these waters let 'em go to law, and be hanged to 'em! Talk of arguing! Lawyer's work. Humph!"

"You mistake, Barker. The Roman fellow whose words slipped out of my

mouth almost unawares said nothing of arguing. 'Fear is the mark only of base minds:' so it runs in English, captain; which is as much as to say that Captain Ben Barker is not the man to haul down his colours in a hurry."

"You're right there. Another shot! That's their argument: well, Ben Barker can talk that way as well as another."

He called up the boatswain. Shortly afterwards the order was piped, "Up all hammocks!" The men quickly stowed their bedding, secured it with lashings, and carried it to the appointed places on the quarter-deck, poop, or forecastle. Meanwhile the boatswain and his mates secured the yards; the ship's carpenter brought up shot plugs for repairing any breaches made under the water-line; and the gunners looked to the cannon and prepared charges for them and the small arms.

Bulger was in charge of the 12-pounder aft, and Mr. Toley had told off Desmond to assist him. They stood side by side watching the progress of the grab, which gained steadily in spite of the plunging due to its curious build. Presently another shot came from her; it shattered the belfry on the forecastle of the *Good Intent*, and splashed into the sea a hundred yards ahead.

"They make good practice, for sartin," remarked Bulger. "I may be wrong, but I'll lay my life there be old man-o'-war's men aboard. I mind me when I was with Captain Golightly on the *Minotaur*----"

But Bulger's yarn was intercepted. At that moment the boatswain piped, "All hands to quarters!" In a surprisingly short time all timber was cleared away, the galley fire was extinguished, the yards slung, the deck strewn with wet sand, and sails, booms, and boats liberally drenched with water. The gun-captains, each with his crew, cast loose the lashings of their weapons and struck open the ports. The tompions were taken out, the sponge, rammer, crows and handspikes placed in readiness, and all awaited eagerly the word for the action to begin.

"'Tis about time we opened our mouths at 'em," said Bulger. "The next bolus they send us as like as not will bring the spars a-rattlin' about our ears. To be sure it goes against my stummick to fire on old messmates; but it en't in Englishmen to hold their noses and swaller pills o' that there size. We'll load up all ready, mateys."

He stripped to the waist, and tied a handkerchief over his ears. Desmond and the men followed his example. Then one of them sponged the bore, another inserted the cartridge, containing three pounds of powder, by means of a long ladle, a third shoved in a wad of rope yarn. This having been driven home by the rammer, the round shot was inserted, and covered like the cartridge with a wad. Then Bulger took his priming-iron, an instrument like a long thin corkscrew, and thrust it into the touch-hole to clear the vent and make an incision in the cartridge. Removing the priming-iron, he replaced it by the priming-tube--a thin tapering

tube with very narrow bore. Into this he poured a quantity of fine mealed powder; then he laid a train of the same powder in the little groove cut in the gun from the touch-hole towards the breech. With the end of his powder-horn he slightly bruised the train, and the gun only awaited a spark from the match.

Everything was done very quickly, and Desmond watched the seamen with admiration. He himself had charge of the linstock, about which were wound several matches, consisting of lengths of twisted cotton wick steeped in lye. They had already been lighted, for they burnt so slowly that they would last for several hours.

"Now we're ship-shape," said Bulger. "Mind you, Burke, don't come too far for'ard with your linstock. I don't want the train fired with no sparks afore I'm ready. And 'ware o' the breech; she'll kick like a jumpin' jackass when the shot flies out of her, an'll knock your teeth out afore you can say Jack Robinson.--Ah! there's the word at last; now, mateys, here goes!"

He laid the gun, waited for the ship to rise from a roll, then took one of the matches, gently blew its smouldering end, and applied the glowing wick to the bruised part of the priming. There was a flash, a roar, and before Desmond could see the effect of the shot Bulger had closed the vent, the gun was run in, and the sponger was at work cleaning the chamber. As the black smoke cleared away it was apparent that the seaman had not forgotten his cunning. The shot had struck the grab on the deck of the prow and smashed into the forecastle. But the bow-chasers were apparently uninjured, for they replied a few seconds later.

"Ah! There's a wunner!" said Bulger admiringly.

A shot had carried away a yard of the gunwale of the *Good Intent*, scattering splinters far and wide, which inflicted nasty wounds on the second mate and a seaman on the quarter-deck. A jagged end of wood flying high struck Diggle on the left cheek. He wiped away the blood imperturbably; it was evident that lack of courage was not among his defects.

Captain Barker's ire was now at white heat. Shouting an order to Bulger and the next man to make rapid practice with the two stern-chasers, he prepared to fall off and bring the *Good Intent's* broadside to bear on the enemy. But the next shot was decisive. Diggle had quietly strolled down to the gun next to Bulger's. It had just been reloaded. He bade the gun-captain, in a low tone, to move aside. Then, with a glance to see that the priming was in order, he took careful sight, and waiting until the grab's main, mizzen, and foremasts opened to view all together, he applied the match. The shot sped true, and a second later the grab's mainmast, with sails and rigging, went by the board.

A wild cheer from the crew of the *Good Intent* acclaimed the excellent shot.

"By thunder!" said Bulger to Desmond, "Diggle may be a rogue, but he knows how to train a gun."

Captain Barker signified his approval by a tremendous mouth-filling oath. But he was not yet safe. The second grab was following hard in the wake of the first; and it was plain that the two Indiamen were both somewhat faster than the *Good Intent*; for during the running fight that had just ended so disastrously for the grab, they had considerably lessened the gap between them and their quarry. Captain Barker watched them with an expression of fierce determination; but not without anxiety. If they should come within striking distance it was impossible to withstand successfully their heavier armament and larger crews. The firing had ceased: each vessel had crowded on all sail; and the brisk breeze must soon bring pursuer and pursued to a close engagement which could have only one result.

"I may be wrong, but seems to me we'd better say our prayers," Bulger remarked grimly to his gun crew.

But Desmond, gazing up at the shrouds, said suddenly:

"The wind's dropping. Look!"

It was true. Before the monsoon sets in in earnest it not unfrequently happens that the wind veers fitfully; a squall is succeeded almost instantaneously by a calm. So it was now. In less than an hour all five vessels were becalmed; and when night fell, three miles separated the *Good Intent* from the second grab; the Indiamen lay a mile further astern; and the damaged vessel was out of sight.

Captain Barker took counsel with his officers. He expected to be attacked during the night by the united boats of the pursuing fleet. Under cover of darkness they would be able to creep up close and board the vessel; and the captain knew well that if taken he would be treated as a pirate. His papers were made out for Philadelphia; he had hoisted Portuguese colours, but the enemy at close quarters could easily see that the *Good Intent* was British built; he had disabled one of the Company's vessels; there would be no mercy for him. He saw no chance of beating off the enemy; they would outnumber him by at least five to one. Even if the wind sprang up again there was small likelihood of escape. One or other of the pursuing vessels would almost certainly overhaul him, and hold him till the others came up.

"'Tis a 'tarnal fix," he said.

"Methinks 'tis a case of 'actum est de nobis'," re marked Diggle, pleasantly.

"Confound you!" said the captain with a burst of anger. "What could I expect with a gallows-bird like you aboard? 'Tis enough to sink a vessel without shot."

Diggle's face darkened. But in a moment his smile returned.

"You are overwrought, captain," he said; "you are unstrung. 'Twould be ridiculous to take amiss words said in haste. In cool blood--well, you know me, Captain Barker. I will leave you to recover from your brief madness."

He went below. The captain was left with Mr. Toley and the other officers. Barker and Toley always got on well together, for the simple reason that the mate

never thwarted his superior, never resented his abuse, but went quietly his own way. He listened now for a quarter of an hour, with fixed sadness of expression, while Captain Barker poured the vials of his wrath upon everything under the sun. When the captain had come to an end, and sunk into a state of lowering dudgeon, Mr. Toley said quietly:

"'Tis all you say, sir, and more. I guess I've never seen a harder case. But while you was speaking, something you said struck a sort of idea into my brain."

"That don't happen often. What is it?"

"Why, the sort of idea that came to me out o' what you was saying was just this. How would it be to take soundings?"

"So that's your notion, is it? Hang me, are you a fool like the rest of 'em! You're always taking soundings! What in the name of thunder do you want to take soundings for?"

"Nothing particular, cap'n. That was the kind o' notion that come of what you was saying. Of course it depends on the depth hereabouts."

"Deep enough to sink you and your notions and all that's like to come of 'em. Darned if I han't got the most lubberly ship's company ever mortal man was plagued with. Officers and men, there en't one of you as is worth your salt, and you with your long face and your notions--why, hang me, you're no more good than the dirtiest waister afloat."

Mr. Toley smiled sadly, and ventured on no rejoinder. After the captain's outburst none of the group dared to utter a word. This pleased him no better; he cursed them all for standing mum, and spent ten minutes in reviling them in turn. Then his passion appeared to have burnt itself out. Turning suddenly to the melancholy mate, he said roughly:

"Go and heave your lead, then, and be hanged to it."

Mr. Toley walked away aft and ordered one of the men to heave the deep-sea lead. The plummet, shaped like the frustum of a cone, and weighing thirty pounds, was thrown out from the side in the line of the vessel's drift.

"By the mark sixty, less five," sang out the man when the lead touched the bottom.

"I guess that'll do," said the first mate, returning to the quarter-deck.

"Well, what about your notion?" said the captain scornfully. But he listened quietly and with an intent look upon his weather-beaten face as Mr. Toley explained.

"You see, sir," he said, "while you was talking just now, I sort o' saw that if they attack us, 'twon't be for at least two hours after dark. The boats won't put off while there's light enough to see 'em; and won't hurry anyhow, 'cos if they did the men 'ud have nary much strength left to 'em. Well, they'll take our bearings, of course. Thinks I, owing to what you said, sir, what if we could shift 'em by half

a mile or so? The boats 'ud miss us in the darkness."

"That's so," ejaculated the captain; "and what then?"

"Well, sir, 'tis there my idea of taking soundings comes in. The *Good Intent* can't be towed, not with our handful of men; but why shouldn't she be kedged? That's the notion, sir; and I guess you'll think it over."

"By jimmy, Mr. Toley, you en't come out o' Salem Massachusetts for nothing. 'Tis a notion, a rare one; Ben Barker en't the man to bear a grudge, and I take back them words o' mine--leastways some on 'em. Bo'sun, get ready to lower the long-boat."

The long-boat was lowered, out of sight of the enemy. A kedge anchor, fastened to a stout hawser, was put on board, and as soon as it was sufficiently dark to make so comparatively small an object as a boat invisible to the hostile craft, she put off at right angles to the *Good Intent's* previous course, the hawser attached to the kedge being paid out as the boat drew away. When it had gone about a fifth of a mile from the vessel the kedge was dropped, and a signal was given by hauling on the rope.

"Clap on, men!" cried Captain Barker. "Get a good purchase, and none of your sing-song; avast all jabber."

The crew manned the windlass and began with a will to haul on the cable in dead silence. The vessel was slowly warped ahead. Meanwhile the long-boat was returning; when she reached the side of the *Good Intent*, a second kedge was lowered into her, and again she put off, to drop the anchor two cables' length beyond the first, so that when the ship had tripped that, the second was ready to be hauled on.

When the *Good Intent* had been thus warped a mile from her position at nightfall, Captain Barker ordered the operation to be stopped. To avoid noise the boat was not hoisted in. No lights were shown, and the sky being somewhat overcast, the boat's crew found that the ship was invisible at the distance of a fourth of a cable's length.

"I may be wrong," said Bulger to Desmond, "but I don't believe kedgin' was ever done so far from harbour afore. I allers thought there was something in that long head of Mr. Toley, though, to be sure, there en't no call for him to pull a long face too."

An hour passed after the kedging had been stopped. All on board the *Good Intent* remained silent, or spoke in whispers, if they spoke at all. There had been no signs of the expected attack. Desmond was leaning on the gunwale, straining his eyes for a glimpse of the enemy. But his ears gave him the first intimation of their approach. He heard a faint creaking, as of oars in rowlocks, and stepped back to where Bulger was leaning against the mast.

"There they come," he said.

The sound had already reached Captain Barker's ears. It was faint; doubtless the oars were muffled. The ship was rolling lazily; save for the creaking nothing was heard but the lapping of the ripples against the hull. So still was the night that the slightest sound must travel far, and the captain remarked in a whisper to Mr. Toley that he guessed the approaching boats to be at least six cable-lengths distant. Officers and men listened intently. The creaking grew no louder; on the contrary, it gradually became fainter, and at last died away. There was a long silence, broken only by what sounded like a low hail some considerable distance astern.

"They're musterin' the boats," said Bulger, with a chuckle. "I may be wrong, but I'll bet my breeches they find they've overshot the mark. Now they'll scatter and try to nose us out."

Another hour of anxious suspense slowly passed, and still nothing had happened. Then suddenly a blue light flashed for a few moments on the blackness of the sea, answered almost instantaneously by a rocket from another quarter. It was clear that the boats, having signalled that the search had failed, had been recalled by the rocket to the fleet.

"By thunder, Mr. Toley, you've done the trick!" said the captain.

"I guess we don't get our living by making mistakes--not in Salem, Massachusetts," returned the first mate with his sad smile.

Through the night the watch was kept with more than ordinary vigilance, but nothing occurred to give Captain Barker anxiety. With morning light the enemy could be seen far astern.

CHAPTER THE TENTH

In which our hero arrives in the Golden East; and Mr. Diggle presents him to a native prince.

About midday a light breeze sprang up from the north-west. The two Indiamen and the uninjured grab, being the first to catch it, gained a full mile before the *Good Intent*, under topgallant sails, studding sails, royal and driver, began to slip through the water at her best speed. But, as the previous day's experience had proved, she was no match in sailing capacity for the pursuers. They gained on

her steadily, and the grab had come almost within cannon-range when the man at the mast-head shouted:

"Sail ho! About a dozen sail ahead, sir!"

The captain spluttered out a round dozen oaths, and his dark face grew still darker. So many vessels in company must surely mean the King's ships with a convoy. The French, so far as Captain Barker knew, had no such fleet in Indian waters, nor had the Dutch or Portuguese. If they were indeed British men-o'-war he would be caught between two fires, for there was not a doubt that they would support the Company's vessels.

"We ought to be within twenty miles o' the coast, Mr. Toley," said Captain Barker.

"Ay, sir, and somewhere in the latitude of Gheria."

"Odds bobs, and now I come to think of it, those there vessels may be sailing to attack Gheria, seeing as how, as these niggers told us, they've bust up Suvarndrug."

"Guess I'll get to the foretop myself and take a look, sir," said Mr. Toley.

He mounted, carrying the only perspective glass the vessel possessed. The captain watched him anxiously as he took a long look.

"What do you make of 'em?" he shouted.

The mate shut up the telescope and came leisurely down.

"I count fifteen in all, sir."

"I don't care how many. What are they?"

"I calculate they're grabs and gallivats, sir."

The captain gave a hoarse chuckle.

"By thunder, then, we'll soon turn the tables! Angria's gallivats--eh, Mr. Toley? We'll make a haul yet."

But Captain Barker was to be disappointed. The fleet had been descried also by the pursuers. A few minutes later the grab threw out a signal, hauled her wind and stood away to the northward, followed closely by the two larger vessels. The captain growled his disappointment. Nearly a dozen of the coast craft, as they were now clearly seen to be, went in pursuit, but with little chance of coming up with the chase. The remaining vessels of the newly-arrived fleet stood out to meet the *Good Intent*.

"Fetch up that Maratha fellow," cried the captain, "and hoist a white flag."

When the Maratha appeared, a pitiable object, emaciated from want of food, Captain Barker bade him shout as soon as the newcomers came within hailing distance. The white flag at the mast-head, and a loud long-drawn hail from Hybati, apprised the grab that the *Good Intent* was no enemy, and averted hostilities. And thus it was, amid a convoy of Angria's own fleet, that Captain Barker's vessel, a few hours later, sailed peacefully into the harbour of Gheria.

Desmond looked with curious eyes on the famous fort and harbour. On the right, as the *Good Intent* entered, he saw a long narrow promontory, at the end of which was a fortress, constructed, as it appeared, of solid rock. The promontory was joined to the mainland by a narrow isthmus of sand, beyond which lay an open town of some size. The shore was fringed with palmyras, mangoes and other tropical trees, and behind the straw huts and stone buildings of the town leafy groves clothed the sides of a gentle hill. The harbour, which formed the mouth of a river, was studded with Angria's vessels, large and small, and from the docks situated on the sandy isthmus came the busy sound of shipwrights at work. The rocky walls of the fort were fifty feet high, with round towers, long curtains, and some fifty embrasures. The left shore of the harbour was flat, but to the south of the fort rose a hill of the same height as the walls of rock. Such was the headquarters of the notorious pirate Tulaji Angria, the last of the line which had for fifty years been the terror of the Malabar coast.

The *Good Intent* dropped anchor off the jetty running out from the docks north of the fort. Captain Barker had already given orders that no shore leave was to be allowed to the crew, and as soon as he had stepped into the long-boat, accompanied by Diggle, the men's discontent broke forth in angry imprecations, which Mr. Toley wisely affected not to hear.

No time was lost in unloading the portion of the cargo intended for Angria. The goods were carried along the jetty by stalwart Marathas clad only in loin-cloths, to be stored in rude cabins with penthouse roofs. As Desmond knew, the heavy chests that taxed the strength of the bearers contained for the most part muskets and ammunition. The work went on for the greater part of the day, and at nightfall neither the captain nor Diggle had returned to the vessel.

Next day a large quantity of Indian produce was taken on board. Desmond noticed that as the bales and casks reached the deck, some of the crew were told off to remove all marks from them.

"What's that for?" repeated Bulger, in reply to a question of Desmond's. "Why, 'cos if the ship came to be overhauled by a Company's vessel, it would tell tales if the cargo had Company's marks on it. That wouldn't do by no manner o' means."

"But how should they get Company's marks on them?"

Bulger winked.

"You're raw yet, Burke," he said. "You'll know quite as much as is good for you by the time you've made another voyage or two in the *Good Intent*."

"But I don't intend to make another voyage in her. Mr. Diggle promised to get me employment in the country."

"What? You still believes in that there Diggle? Well, I don't want to hurt no feelin's, and I may be wrong, but I'll lay my bottom dollar Diggle won't do a

hand's turn for you."

The second day passed, and in the evening Captain Barker, who had hitherto left Mr. Toley in charge, came aboard in high good humour.

"I may be wrong," remarked Bulger, "but judgin' by cap'n's face, he've been an' choused the Pirate--got twice the vally o' the goods he's landed."

"I wonder where Mr. Diggle is?" said Desmond.

"You en't no call to mourn for him, I tell you. He's an old friend of the Pirate, don't make no mistake; neither you nor me will be any the worse for not seein' his grinnin' phiz no more. Thank your stars he've left you alone for the last part of the voyage, which I wonder at, all the same."

Next day all was bustle on board in preparation for sailing. In the afternoon a peon[#] came hurrying along the jetty, boarded the vessel, and handed a note to the captain, who read it, tore it up, and dismissed the messenger. He went down to his cabin, and coming up a few minutes later, cried:

[#] Messenger.

"Where's that boy Burke?"

"Here, sir," cried Desmond, starting up from the place where, in Bulger's company, he had been splicing a rope.

"Idling away your time as usual, of course. Here, take this chit[#] and run ashore. 'Tis for Mr. Diggle, as you can see if you can read."

[#] Note.

"But how am I to find him, sir?"

"Hang me, that's your concern. Find him, and give the chit into his own hand, and be back without any tomfoolery, or by thunder I'll lay a rope across your shoulders."

Desmond took the note, left the vessel, and hurried along the jetty. After what Bulger had said he was not very well pleased at the prospect of meeting Diggle again. At the shore end of the jetty he was accosted by the peon who had brought Diggle's note on board. The man intimated by signs that he would show the way, and Desmond, wondering why the Indian had not himself waited to receive Captain Barker's answer, followed him at a rapid pace on shore, past the docks, through a corner of the town, where the appearance of a white stranger

attracted the curious attention of the natives, to an open space in front of the entrance to the fort. Here they arrived at a low wall cut by an open gateway, at each side of which stood a Maratha sentry armed with a matchlock. A few words were exchanged between Desmond's guide and one of the sentries; the two entered, crossed a compound dotted with trees, and passing through the principal gateway came to a large square building near the centre of the fort. The door of this was guarded by a sentry. Again a few words were spoken. Desmond fancied he saw a slight smile curl the lips of the natives; then the sentry called another peon who stood at hand, and sent him into the palace.

Desmond felt a strange sinking at heart. The smile upon these dark faces awakened a vague uneasiness; it was so like Diggle's smile. He supposed that the man had gone in to report that he had arrived with the captain's answer. The note still remained with him; the Marathas apparently knew that it was to be delivered personally; yet he was left at the door, and his guide stood by in an attitude that suggested he was on guard.

How long was he to be kept waiting? he wondered. Captain Barker had ordered him to return at once; the penalty for disobedience he knew only too well; yet the minutes passed, and lengthened into two hours without any sign of the man who had gone in with the message. Desmond spoke to his guide, but the man shook his head, knowing no English. Becoming more and more uneasy, he was at length relieved to see the messenger come back to the door and beckon him to enter. As he passed the sentries they made him a salaam in which his anxious sensitiveness detected a shade of mockery; but before he could define his feelings he reached a third door guarded like the others, and was ushered in.

He found himself in a large chamber, its walls dazzling with barbaric decoration--figures of Ganessa, a favourite idol of the Marathas, of monstrous elephants, and peacocks with enormously expanded tails. The hall was so crowded that his first confusion was redoubled. A path was made through the throng as at a signal, and at the end of the room he saw two men apart from the rest. One of them, standing a little back from the other, was Diggle; the other, a tall, powerful figure in raiment as gaudy as the painted peacocks around him, his fingers covered with rings, a diamond blazing in his headdress, was sitting cross-legged on a dais. Behind him, against the wall, was an image of Ganessa, made of solid gold, with diamonds for eyes, and blazing with jewels. At one side was his hookah, at the other a two-edged sword and an unsheathed dagger. Below the dais on either hand two fierce-visaged Marathas stood, their heads and shoulders covered with a helmet, their bodies cased in a quilted vest, each holding a straight two-edged sword. Between Angria and the idol two fan-bearers lightly swept the air above their lord's head with broad fans of palm leaves.

Desmond walked towards the dais, feeling wofully out of place amid the

brilliant costumes of Angria's court. Scarcely two of the Marathas were dressed alike; some were in white, some in lilac, others in purple, but each with ornaments after his own taste. Desmond had not had time before leaving the *Good Intent* to smarten himself up, and he stood there a tall, thin, sunburnt youth in dirty, tattered garments, doing his best to face the assembly with British courage. At the foot of the dais he paused and held out the captain's note. Diggle took it in silence, his face wearing the smile that Desmond knew so well and now so fully distrusted. Without reading it, he tore it in fragments and threw them upon the floor, at the same time saying a few words to the resplendent figure at his side.

Tulaji Angria was dark, inclined to be fat, and not unpleasant in feature. But it was with a scowling brow that he replied to Diggle. Desmond was no coward, but he afterwards confessed that as he stood there watching the two faces, the dark lowering face of Angria, the smiling, scarcely less swarthy face of Diggle, he felt his knees tremble under him. What was the Pirate saying? That he was the subject of their conversation was plain from the glances thrown at him; that he was at a crisis in his fate he knew by instinct; but, ignorant of the tongue they spoke, he could but wait in fearful anxiety and mistrust.

He learnt afterwards the purport of the talk.

"That is your man!" said Angria. "You have deceived me. I looked for a man of large stature and robust make, like the Englishmen I already have. What good will this slim, starved stripling be in my barge?"

"You must not be impatient, huzur[#]," replied Diggle. "He is a stripling, it is true; slim, certainly; starved--well, the work on board ship does not tend to fatten a man. But give him time; he is but sixteen or seventeen years old, young in my country. In a year or two, under your regimen, he will develop; he comes of a hardy stock, and already he can make himself useful. He was one of the quickest and handiest on board our ship, though this was his first voyage."

[#] Lord.

"But you yourself admit that he is not yet competent for the oar in my barge. What is to recompense me for the food he will eat while he is growing? No, Diggle sahib, if I take him I must have some allowance off the price. In truth, I will not take him unless you send me from your vessel a dozen good muskets. That is my word."

"Still, huzur----" began Diggle, but Angria cut him short with a gesture of impatience.

"That is my word, I say. Shall I, Tulaji Angria, dispute with you? I will have

twenty muskets, or you may keep the boy."

Diggle shrugged and smiled.

"Very well, huzur. You drive a hard bargain; but it shall be as you say. I will send a chit to the captain, and you shall have the muskets before the ship sails."

Angria made a sign to one of his attendants. The man approached Desmond, took him by the sleeve, and signed to him to come away. Desmond threw a beseeching look at Diggle, and said hurriedly:

"Mr. Diggle, please tell me----"

But Angria rose to his feet in wrath, and shouted to the man who had Desmond by the sleeve. Desmond made no further resistance. His head swam as he passed between the dusky ranks out into the courtyard.

"What does it all mean?" he asked himself.

His guide hurried him along until they came to a barn-like building under the north-west angle of the fort. The Maratha unlocked the door, signed to Desmond to enter, and locked him in. He was alone.

He spent three miserable hours. Bitterly did he now regret having cast in his lot with the smooth-spoken stranger who had been so sympathetic with him in his troubles at home. He tried to guess what was to be done with him. He was in Angria's power, a prisoner, but to what end? Had he run from the tyranny at home merely to fall a victim to a worse tyranny at the hands of an Oriental? He knew so little of Angria, and his brain was in such a turmoil, that he could not give definite shape to his fears. He paced up and down the hot, stuffy shed, awaiting, dreading, he knew not what. Through the hole that served for a window he saw men passing to and fro across the courtyard, but they were all swarthy, all alien; there was no one from whom he could expect a friendly word.

Towards evening, as he looked through the hole, he saw Diggle issue from the door of the palace and cross towards the outer gate.

"Mr. Diggle! Mr. Diggle!" he called. "Please! I am locked up here."

Diggle looked round, smiled, and leisurely approached the shed.

"Why have they shut me up here?" demanded Desmond. "Captain Barker said I was to return at once. Do get the door unlocked."

"You ask the impossible, my young friend," replied Diggle through the hole. "You are here by the orders of Angria, and 'twould be treason in me to pick his locks."

"But why? what right has he to lock me up? and you, why did you let him? You said you were my friend; you promised--oh, you know what you promised."

"I promised? Truly, I promised that, if you were bent on accompanying me to these shores, I would use my influence to procure you employment with one of my friends among the native princes. Well, I have kept my word; 'firmavi fidem,' as the Latin hath it. Angria is my friend; I have used my influence with him; and

you are now in the service of one of the most potent of Indian princes. True, your service is but beginning. It may be arduous at first; it may be long 'ab ovo usque ad mala'; the egg may be hard, and the apples, perchance, somewhat sour; but as you become inured to your duties, you will learn resignation and patience, and----"

"Don't!" burst out Desmond, unable to endure the smooth-flowing periods of the man now self-confessed a villain. "What does it mean? Tell me plainly; am I a slave?"

"'Servulus, non servus,' my dear boy. What is the odds whether you serve Dick Burke, a booby farmer, or Tulaji Angria, a prince and a man of intelligence? Yet there is a difference, and I would give you a word of counsel. Angria is an Oriental, and a despot; it were best to serve him with all diligence, or----"

He finished the sentence with a meaning grimace.

"Mr. Diggle, you can't mean it," said Desmond. "Don't leave me here! I implore you to release me. What have I ever done to you? Don't leave me in this awful place."

Diggle smiled and began to move away. At the sight of his malicious smile the prisoner's despair was swept away before a tempest of rage.

"You scoundrel! You shameless scoundrel!"

The words, low spoken and vibrant with contempt, reached Diggle when he was some distance from the shed. He turned and sauntered back.

"Heia! Contumeliosae voces! 'Tis pretty abuse. My young friend, I must withdraw my ears from such shocking language. But stay! if you have any message for Sir Willoughby, your squire, whose affections you have so diligently cultivated to the prejudice of his nearest and dearest, it were well for you to give it. 'Tis your last opportunity; for those who enter Angria's service enjoy a useful but not a long career. And before I return to Gheria from a little journey I am about to take, you may have joined the majority of those who have tempted fate in this insalubrious clime. In a moment swift death cometh--you remember the phrase?"

Diggle leant against the wooden wall, watching with malicious enjoyment the effect of his words. Desmond was very pale; all his strength seemed to have deserted him. Finding that his taunts provoked no reply, Diggle went on:

"Time presses, my young friend. You will be logged a deserter from the *Good Intent.* 'Tis my fervent hope you never fall into the hands of Captain Barker; as you know, he is a terrible man when roused."

Waving his gloved hand he moved away. Desmond did not watch his departure. Falling back from the window, he threw himself upon the ground, and gave way to a long fit of black despair.

How long he lay in this agony he knew not. But he was at last roused by the opening of the door. It was almost dark. Rising to his feet, he saw a number

of men hustled into the shed. Ranged along one of the walls, they squatted on the floor, and for some minutes afterwards Desmond heard the clank of irons and the harsh grating of a key. Then a big Maratha came to him, searched him thoroughly, clapped iron bands upon his ankles, and locked the chains to staples in the wall. Soon the door was shut, barred, and locked, and Desmond found himself a prisoner with eight others.

For a little they spoke among themselves, in the low tones of men utterly spent and dispirited. Then all was silent, and they slept. But Desmond lay wide awake, waiting for the morning.

The shed was terribly hot. Air came only through the one narrow opening, and before an hour was past the atmosphere was foul, seeming the more horrible to Desmond by contrast with the freshness of his life on the ocean. Mosquitoes nipped him until he could scarcely endure the intense irritation. He would have given anything for a little water; but though he heard a sentry pacing up and down outside, he did not venture to call to him, and could only writhe in heat and torture, longing for the dawn, yet fearing it and what it might bring forth.

Worn and haggard after his sleepless night, Desmond had scarcely spirit enough to look with curiosity on his fellow-prisoners when the shed was faintly lit by the morning sun. But he saw that the eight men, all natives, were lying on rude charpoys[#] along the wall, each man chained to a staple like his own. One of the men was awake; and, catching Desmond's lustreless eyes fixed upon him, he sat up and returned his gaze.

[#] Mat beds.

"Your honour is an English gentleman?"

The words caused Desmond to start: they were so unexpected in such a place. The Indian spoke softly and carefully, as if anxious not to awaken his companions.

"Yes," replied Desmond. "Who are you?"

"My name, sir, is Surendra Nath Chuckerbutti. I was lately a clerk in the employ of a burra[#] sahib, English factor, at Calcutta."

[#] Great.

"How did you get here?"

"That, sahib, is a moving tale. While on a visit of condolence to my respectable uncle and aunt at Chittagong, I was kidnapped by Sanderband piratical dogs. Presto!--at that serious crisis a Dutch ship makes apparition and rescues me; but my last state is more desperate than the first. The Dutch vessel will not stop to replace me on mother-earth; she is for Bombay across the kala pani[#], as we say. I am not a swimmer; besides, what boots it?--we are ten miles from land, to say nothing of sharks and crocodiles and the lordly tiger. So I perforce remain, to the injury of my caste, which forbids navigation. But see the issue. The Dutch ship is assaulted; grabs and gallivats galore swarm upon the face of the waters; all is confusion worse confounded; in a brace of shakes we are in the toils. It is now two years since this untoward catastrophe. With the crew I am conveyed hither and eat the bitter crust of servitude. Some of the Dutchmen are consigned to other forts in possession of the Pirate, and three serve here in his state barge."

[#] Black water--the sea.

Desmond glanced at the sleeping forms.

"No, sir, they are not here," said the Babu[#], catching his look. "They share another apartment with your countrymen--chained? Oh yes! These, my bedfellows of misfortune, are Indians, not of Bengal, like myself; two are Biluchis hauled from a country ship; two are Musalmans from Mysore; one a Gujarati; two Marathas. We are a motley crew--a miscellany, no less."

[#] Equivalent to Mr.; generally applied to educated Bengalis.

"What do they do with you in the daytime?"

"I, sir, adjust accounts of the Pirate's dockyard; for this I am qualified by prolonged driving of quill in Calcutta, to expressed satisfaction of Honourable Company and English merchants. But my position, sir, is of Damoclean anxiety. I am horrified by conviction that one small error of calculation will entail direst retribution. Videlicet, sir, this week a fellow-captive is minus a finger and thumb--and all for oversight of six annas.[#] But I hear the step of our jailer; I must bridle my tongue."

[#] The anna is the sixteenth part of a rupee.

The Babu had spoken throughout in a low monotonous tone that had not disturbed the slumbers of his fellow-prisoners. But they were all awakened by the noisy opening of the door and the entrance of their jailer. He went to each in turn, and unlocked their fetters; then they filed out in dumb submission, to be escorted by armed sentries to the different sheds where they fed, each caste by itself. When the eight had disappeared the jailer turned to Desmond, and, taking him by the sleeve, led him across the courtyard into the palace. Here, in a little room, he was given a meagre breakfast of rice; after which he was taken to another room where he found Angria in company with a big Maratha, who had in his hand a long bamboo cane. The Pirate was no longer in durbar[#] array, but was clad in a long yellow robe with a lilac-coloured shawl.

[#] Council, ceremonial.

Conscious that he made a very poor appearance in his tatters, Desmond felt that the two men looked at him with contempt. A brief conversation passed between them; then the Maratha salaamed to Angria and went from the room, beckoning Desmond to follow him. They went out of the precincts of the palace, and through a part of the town, until they arrived at the docks. There the labourers, slaves and free, were already at work. Desmond at the first glance noticed several Europeans among them, miserable objects who scarcely lifted their heads to look at this latest newcomer of their race. His guide called up one of the foremen shipwrights, and instructed him to place the boy among a gang of the workmen. Then he went away. Scarcely a minute had elapsed when Desmond heard a cry, and looking round, saw the man brutally belabouring with his rattan the bare shoulders of a native. He quivered; the incident seemed of ill augury. In a few minutes Desmond found himself among a gang of men who were working at a new gallivat in process of construction for Angria's own use. He received his orders in dumb show from the foreman of the gang. Miserable as he was, he would not have been a boy if he had not been interested in his novel surroundings; and no intelligent boy could have failed to take an interest in the construction of a gallivat. It was a large rowboat of from thirty to seventy tons, with two masts, the mizzen being very slight. The mainmast bore one huge sail, triangular in form, its peak extending to a considerable height above the mast. The smaller gallivats were covered with a spar deck made of split bamboos, their armament consisting of pettararoes fixed on swivels in the gunwale. But the larger vessels had a fixed deck on which were mounted six or eight cannon, from two- to four-pounders; and in addition to their sail they had from forty to fifty oars, so that, with a stout crew, they attained, even

in a calm, a rate of four or five miles an hour.

One of the first things Desmond learnt was that the Indian mode of ship-building differed fundamentally from the European. The timbers were fitted in after the planks had been put together; and the planks were put together, not with flat edges, but rabbeted, the parts made to correspond with the greatest exactness. When a plank was set up, its edge was smeared with red lead, and the edge of the plank to come next was pressed down upon it, the inequalities in its surface being thus shown by the marks of the lead. These being smoothed away, if necessary several times, and the edges fitting exactly, they were rubbed with da'ma, a sort of glue that in course of time became as hard as iron. The planks were then firmly riveted with pegs, and by the time the work was finished the seams were scarcely visible, the whole forming apparently one entire piece of timber.

The process of building a gallivat was thus a very long and tedious one; but the vessel when completed was so strong that it could go to sea for many years before the hull needed repair.

Desmond learnt all this only gradually; but from the first day, making a virtue of necessity, he threw himself into the work and became very useful, winning the good opinion of the officers of the dockyard. His feelings were frequently wrung by the brutal punishments inflicted by the overseer upon defaulters. The man had absolute power over the workers. He could flog them, starve them, even cut off their ears and noses. One of his favourite devices was to tie a quantity of oiled cotton round each of a man's fingers and set light to these living torches. Another, used with a man whom he considered lazy, was the tank. Between the dockyard and the river, separated from the latter only by a thin wall, was a square cavity about seven feet deep covered with boarding, in the centre of which was a circular hole. In the wall was a small orifice through which water could be let in from the river, while in the opposite wall was the pipe and spout of a small hand-pump. The man whom the overseer regarded as an idler was let down into the tank, the covering replaced, and water allowed to enter from the river. This was a potent spur to the defaulter's activity, for if he did not work the pump fast enough the water would gradually rise in the tank, and he would drown. Desmond learnt of one case where the man, utterly worn out by his life of alternate toil and punishment, refused to work the pump and stood in silent indifference while the water mounted inch by inch until it covered his head and ended his woes.

Desmond's diligence in the dockyard pleased the overseer, whose name was Govinda, and he was by and by employed on lighter tasks which took him sometimes into the town. Until the novelty wore off he felt a lively interest in the scenes that met his eye--the bazaars, crowded with dark-skinned natives, the men moustachioed, clad for the most part in white garments that covered them from the crown of the head to the knee, with a touch of red sometimes in their tur-

bans; the women with bare heads and arms and feet, garbed in red and blue; the gosains, mendicants with matted hair and unspeakable filth; the women who fried chapatis[#] on griddles in the streets, grinding their meal in handmills; the sword-grinders, whetting the blades of the Maratha two-edged swords; the barbers, whose shops had a never-ending succession of customers; the Brahmans, almost naked and shaved bald save for a small tuft at the back of the head; the sellers of madi, a toddy extracted from the cocoanut palm; the magicians in their shawls, with high stiff red cap, painted all over with snakes; the humped bullocks that were employed as beasts of burden, and when not in use roamed the streets untended; occasionally the hasawa, the sacred bull of Siva the destroyer, and the rath[#] carrying the sacred rat of Ganessa. But with familiarity such scenes lost their charm; and as the months passed away Desmond felt more and more the gnawing of care at his heart, the constant sadness of a slave.

[#] Small flat unleavened cakes.

[#] Car.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

In which the Babu tells the story of King Vikramâditya; and the discerning reader may find more than appears on the surface.

Day followed day in dreary sameness. Regularly every evening Desmond was locked with his eight fellow-prisoners in the shed, there to spend hours of weariness and discomfort until morning brought release and the common task. He had the same rations of rice and ragi,[#] with occasional doles of more substantial fare. He was carefully kept from all communication with the other European prisoners, and as the Bengali was the only man of his set who knew English, his only opportunities of using his native tongue occurred in the evening, before he slept.

[#] A cereal.

His fellow-prisoners spoke Urdu among themselves, and Desmond found some alleviation of the monotony of his life in learning the lingua franca of India under the Babu's tuition. He was encouraged to persevere in the study by the fact that the Babu proved to be an excellent story-teller, often beguiling the tedium of wakeful hours in the shed by relating interminable narratives from the Hindu mythology, and in particular the exploits of the legendary hero Vikramâditya. So accomplished was he in this very Oriental art that it was not uncommon for one or other of the sentries to listen to him through the opening in the shed wall, and the head-warder who locked the prisoners' fetters would himself sometimes squat down at the door before leaving them at night, and remain an interested auditor until the blast of a horn warned all in fort and town that the hour of sleep had come. It was some time before Desmond was sufficiently familiar with the language to pick up more than a few words of the stories here and there, but in three months he found himself able to follow the narrative with ease.

Meanwhile he was growing apace. The constant work in the open air, clad, save, during the rains, in nothing but a thin dhoti[#], developed his physique and, even in that hot climate, hardened his muscles. The Babu one day remarked with envy that he would soon be deemed worthy of promotion to Angria's own gallivat, whose crew consisted of picked men of all nationalities. This was an honour Desmond by no means coveted. As a dockyard workman, earning his food by the sweat of his brow, he did not come in contact with Angria, and was indeed less hardly used than he had been on board the *Good Intent*. But to become a galley-slave seemed to him a different thing, and the prospect of pulling an oar in the Pirate's gallivat served to intensify his longing to be free.

[#] A cloth worn round the waist, passed between the legs and tucked in behind the back.

For, though he proved so willing and docile in the dockyard, not a day passed but he pondered the idea of escape. He seized every opportunity of learning the topography of the fort and town, being aided in this unwittingly by Govinda, who employed him more and more often, as he became familiar with the language, in conveying messages from one part of the settlement to another. But he was forced to confess to himself that the chances of escape were very slight. Gheria was many miles from the nearest European settlement where he might find refuge. To escape by sea seemed impossible; if he fled through the town and got clear of Angria's territory he would almost certainly fall into the hands of the Peshwa's[#] people, and although the Peshwa was nominally an ally of the Company, his subjects--a lawless, turbulent, predatory race--were not likely to be specially friendly to a

solitary English lad. A half-felt hope that he might be able to reach Suvarndrug, lately captured by Commodore James, was dashed by the news that that fort had been handed over by him to the Marathas. Moreover, such was the rivalry among the various European nations competing for trade in India that he was by no means sure of a friendly reception if he should succeed in gaining a Portuguese or Dutch settlement. Dark stories were told of Portuguese dealings with Englishmen, and the Dutch bore no good repute for their treatment of prisoners.

[#] The prime minister and real ruler of the Maratha kingdom.

It was a matter of wonder to Desmond that none of his companions ever hinted at escape. He could not imagine that any man could be a slave without feeling a yearning for liberty; yet these men lived through the unvarying round, eating, toiling, sleeping, without any apparent mental revolt. He could only surmise that all manliness and spirit had been crushed out of them, and from motives of prudence he forbore to speak of freedom.

But one evening, a sultry October evening when the shed was like an oven, and, bathed in sweat, he felt utterly limp and depressed, he asked the Babu in English whether any one had ever escaped out of Angria's clutches. Surendra Nath Chuckerbutti glanced anxiously around, as if fearful that the others might understand. But they lay listless on their charpoys; they knew no English, and there was nothing in Desmond's tone to quicken their hopelessness.

"No, sahib," said the Bengali; "such escapade, if successful, is beyond my ken. There have been attempts: *cui bono*? Nobody is an anna the better. Nay, the last state of such misguided men is even worse; they die suffering very ingenious torture."

Desmond had been amazed at the Babu's command of English until he learnt that the man was an omnivorous reader, and in his leisure at Calcutta had spent many an hour in poring over such literature as his master's scanty library afforded, the works of Mr. Samuel Johnson and Mr. Henry Fielding in particular.

At this moment Desmond said no more, but in the dead of night, when all were asleep, he leant over to the Babu's charpoy and gently nudged him.

"Surendra Nath!" he whispered.

"Who calls?" returned the Babu.

"Listen. Have you yourself ever thought of escaping?"

"Peace and quietness, sir. He will hear."

"Who?"

"The Gujarati, sir--Fuzl Khan."

"But he doesn't understand. And if he did, what then?"

"He was the single man, positively unique, who was spared among six attempting escape last rains."

"They did make an attempt, then. Why was he spared?"

"That, sir, deponent knoweth not. The plot was carried to Angria."

"How?"

"That also is dark as pitch. But Fuzl Khan was spared, that we know. No man can trust his *vis-à-vis*. No man is now so bold to discuss such matters."

"Is that why we are all chained up at night?"

"That, sir, is the case. It is since then our limbs are shackled."

Desmond thought over this piece of information. He had noticed that the Gujarati was left much alone by the others. They were outwardly civil enough, but they rarely spoke to him of their own accord, and sometimes they would break off in a conversation if he appeared interested. Desmond had put this down to the man's temper; he was a sullen fellow, with a perpetually hangdog look, occasionally breaking out in paroxysms of violence which cost him many a scourging from the overseer's merciless rattan. But the attitude of his fellow-prisoner was more easily explained if the Babu's hint was well founded. They feared him. Yet, if he had indeed betrayed his comrades, he had gained little by his treachery. He was no favourite with the officers of the yard. They kept him hard at work, and seemed to take a delight in harrying him. More than once, unjustly as it appeared to Desmond, he had made acquaintance with the punishment tank. In his dealings with his fellows he was morose and offensive. A man of great physical strength, he was a match for any two of his shed companions save the Biluchis, who, though individually weaker, retained something of the spirit of their race and made common cause against him. The rest he bullied, and none more than the Bengali, whose weaklier constitution spared him the hard manual work of the yard, but whose timidity invited aggression.

Now that the subject which constantly occupied his thoughts had been mooted, Desmond found himself more eagerly striving to find a solution of the problem presented by the idea of escape. At all hours of the day, and often when he lay in sleepless discomfort at night, his active mind recurred to the one absorbing matter: how to regain his freedom. He had already canvassed the possibilities of escape by land, only to dismiss the idea as utterly impracticable; for even could he elude the vigilance of the sentries he could not pass as a native, and the perils besetting an Englishman were not confined to Angria's territory. But how stood the chances of escape by sea? Could he stow himself on board a grab or gallivat, and try to swim ashore when near some friendly port? He put the suggestion from him as absurd. Supposing he succeeded in stowing himself on an outgoing vessel, how could he know when he was near a friendly port without risking almost

certain discovery? Besides, except in such rare cases as the visit of an interloper like the *Good Intent*, the Pirate did little trade. His vessels were employed mainly in dashing out on insufficiently-convoyed merchantmen.

But the train of thought once started could not but be followed out. What if he could seize a grab or gallivat in the harbour? To navigate such a vessel required a party, men having some knowledge of the sea. How stood his fellow-prisoners in that respect? The Biluchis, tall wiry men, were traders, and had several times, he knew, made the voyage from the Persian Gulf to Surat. It was on one of these journeys that they had fallen into Angria's hands. They might have picked up something of the simpler details of navigation. The Mysoreans, being up-country men and agriculturists, were not likely even to have seen the sea until they became slaves of Angria. The Marathas would be loth to embark; they belonged to a warrior race which had for centuries lived by raiding its neighbours; but being forbidden by their religion to eat or drink at sea they would never make good sailors. The Babu was a native of Bengal, and the Bengalis were physically the weakest of the Indian peoples, constitutionally timid, and unenterprising in matters demanding physical courage. Desmond smiled as he thought of how his friend Surendra Nath might comport himself in a storm.

There remained the Gujarati, and of his nautical capacity Desmond knew nothing. But, mentioning the matter of seamanship casually to the Babu one day, he learnt that Fuzl Khan was a khalasi[#] from Cutch. He had in him a strain of negro blood, derived probably from some Zanzibari ancestor brought to Cutch as a slave. The men of the coast of Cutch were the best sailors in India; and Fuzl Khan himself had spent a considerable portion of his life at sea.

[#] Sailor.

Thus reflecting on the qualities of his fellow-captives. Desmond had ruefully to acknowledge that they would make a poor crew to navigate a grab or gallivat. Yet he could find no other, for Angria's system of mixing the nationalities was cunningly devised to prevent any concerted schemes. If the attempt was to be made at all, it must be made with the men whom he knew intimately and with whom he had opportunities of discussing a plan.

But he was at once faced by the question of the Gujarati's trustworthiness. If there was any truth in Surendra Nath's suspicions, he would be quite ready to betray his fellows; and if looks and manner were any criterion, the suspicions were amply justified. True, the man had gained nothing by his former treachery, but that might not prevent him from repeating it, in the hope that a second

betrayal would compel reward.

While Desmond was still pondering and puzzling, it happened one unfortunate day that Govinda the overseer was carried off within a few hours by what the Babu called the cramp--the disease now known as cholera. His place was immediately filled. But his successor was a very different man. He was not so capable as Govinda, and endeavoured to make up for his incapacity by greater brutality and violence. The work of the yard fell off; he tried to mend matters by harrying the men. The whip and rattan were in constant use, but the result was less efficiency than ever, and he sought for the cause everywhere but in himself. The lives of the captives, bad enough before, became a continual torment. Desmond fared no better than the rest. He lost the trifling privileges he had formerly enjoyed. The new overseer seemed to take a delight in bullying him. Many a night, when he returned to the shed, his back was raw where the lash had cut a livid streak through his thin dhoti. His companions suffered in common with him, Fuzl Khan more than any. For days at a time the man was incapacitated from work by the treatment meted out to him. Desmond felt that if the Gujarati had indeed purchased his life by betraying his comrades, he had made a dear bargain.

One night, when his eight companions were all asleep, and nothing could be heard but the regular calls of the sentries, the beating of tom-toms in the town, and the howls of jackals prowling on the outskirts, Desmond gently woke the Babu.

"My friend, listen," he whispered, "I have something to say to you."

Surendra Nath turned over on his charpoy.

"Speak soft, I pray," he said.

"My head is on fire," continued Desmond. "I cannot sleep. I have been thinking. What is life worth to us? Can anything be worse than our present lot? Do you ever think of escape?"

"What good, sir? I have said so before. We are fettered; what can we do? There is but one thing that all men in our plight desire; that is death."

"Nonsense! I do not desire death. This life is hateful, but while we live there is something to hope for, and I for one am not content to endure life-long misery. I mean to escape."

"It is easy to say, but the doing--that is impossible."

"How can we tell that unless we try? The men who tried to escape did not think it impossible. They might have succeeded--who can say?--if Fuzl Khan had not betrayed them."

"And he is still with us. He would betray us again."

"I am not sure of that. See what he has suffered! To-day his whole body must have writhed with pain. But for the majum[#] he has smoked and the plentiful ghi[#] we rubbed him with, he would be moaning now. I think he will be with us

if we can only find out a way. You have been here longer than I; cannot you help me to form a plan?"

[#] A preparation of hemp.
[#] Clarified butter.

"No, sahib; my brain is like running water. Besides, I am afraid. If we could get rid of our fetters and escape, we might have to fight. I cannot fight; I am not a man of war; I am commercial."

"But you will help me if I can think of a plan?"

"I cannot persuade myself to promise, sahib. It is impossible. Death is the only deliverer."

Desmond was impatient of the man's lack of spirit. But he suffered no sign of his feeling to escape him. He had grown to have a liking for the Babu.

"Well, I shall not give up the idea," he said. "Perhaps I shall speak of it to you again."

Two nights later, in the dark and silent hours, Desmond reopened the matter. This time the conversation lasted much longer, and in the course of it the Babu became so much interested and indeed excited that he forgot his usual caution, and spoke in a high-pitched tone that woke the Biluchi on the other side. The man hurled abuse at the disturber of his repose, and Surendra Nath regained his caution and relapsed into his usual soft murmur. Desmond and he were still talking when the light of dawn stole into the shed; but though neither had slept, they went about their work during the day with unusual briskness and lightness of heart.

That evening, after the prisoners had eaten their supper in their respective eating-rooms, they squatted against the outer wall of the shed for a brief rest before being locked up for the night. The Babu had promised to tell a story. The approaches to the yard were all guarded by the usual sentries, and in the distance could be heard the clanking of the warder's keys as he went from shed to shed performing his nightly office.

"The story! the story!" said one of the Marathas impatiently. "Why dost thou tarry, Babu?"

"I have eaten, Gousla, and when the belly is full the brain is sluggish. But the balance is adjusting itself, and in a little I will begin."

Through the further gate came the warder. Desmond and his companions were the last with whom he had to deal. His keys jangling, he advanced slowly between two Marathas armed with matchlocks and two-edged swords.

The Babu had his back against the shed, the others were grouped about him,

and at his left there was a vacant space. It was growing dusk.

"Hail, worthy jailer!" said Surendra Nath pleasantly. "I was about to tell the marvellous story of King Bhoya's golden throne. But I will even now check the stream at the source. Your time is precious. My comrades must wait until we get inside."

"Not so, Babu," said the warder gruffly. "Tell thy tale. Barik Allah![#] you nine are the last of my round. I will myself wait and hear, for thou hast a ready tongue, and the learning of a pundit,[#] Babu, and thy stories, after the day's work, are they not as honey poured on rice?"

[#] Praise to Allah!

[#] Learned man, teacher.

"You honour me beyond my deserts. If you will deign to be seated!"

The warder marched to the vacant spot at the Babu's side, and squatted down, crossing his legs, his heavy bunch of keys lying on the skirt of his dhoti. The armed Marathas stood at a little distance, leaning on their matchlocks, within hearing of the Babu, and at spots where they could see any one approaching from either end of the yard. It would not do for the warder to be found thus by the officer of the watch.

"It happened during the reign of the illustrious King Bhoya," began the Babu; then he caught his breath, looking strangely nervous. "It is the heat, good jailer," he said hurriedly; "--of the illustrious King Bhoya, I said, that a poor ryot[#] named Yajnadatta, digging one day in his field, found there buried the divine throne of the incomparable King Vikramâditya. When his eyes were somewhat recovered from the dazzling vision, and he could gaze unblinking at the wondrous throne, he beheld that it was resplendent with thirty-two graven images, and adorned with a multitude of jewels: rubies and diamonds, pearls and jasper, crystal and coral and sapphires.

[#] Peasant.

"Now the news of this wondrous discovery coming to the ears of King Bhoya, he incontinently caused the throne to be conveyed to his palace, and had it set in the midst of his hall of counsel that rose on columns of gold and silver, of coral and crystal. Then the desire came upon him to sit on this throne, and calling

his wise men, he bade them choose a moment of good augury, and gave order to his servitors to make all things ready for his coronation. Whereupon his people brought curded milk, sandalwood, flowers, saffron, umbrellas, parasols, divers tails--tails of oxen, tails of peacocks; arrows, weapons of war, mirrors and other objects proper to be held by wedded women--all things, indeed, meet for a solemn festival, with a well-striped tiger-skin to represent the seven continents of the earth; nothing was wanting of all the matters prescribed in the Shastras[#] for the solemn crowning of kings; and having thus fulfilled their duty, the servitors humbly acquainted his majesty therewith. Then, when the Guru,[#] the Purohita,[#] the Brahmans, the wise men, the councillors, the officers, the soldiers, the chief captain, had entered, the august King Bhoya drew near to the throne, to the end that he might be anointed.

[#] Holy Books.

[#] Religious teacher.

[#] Hereditary priest of the royal house.

"But lo! the first of the carven figures that surrounded the throne thus spake and said: 'Hearken, O king. That prince who is endowed with sovereign qualities; who shines before all others in wealth, in liberality, in mercy; who excels in heroism and in goodness; who is drawn by his nature to deeds of piety; who is full of might and majesty; that prince alone is worthy to sit upon this throne--no other, no meaner sovereign, is worthy. Hearken, O king, to the story of the throne.'"

"Go on, Babu," said the jailer, as the narrator paused; "what said the graven image?"

"'There once lived,'" continued the Babu, "'in the city of Avanti, a king, Bartrihari by name. Having come to recognize the vanity of earthly things, this king one day left his throne and went as a jogi[#] afar into the desert. His kingdom, being then without a head--for he had no sons, and his younger brother, the illustrious Vikramâditya, was travelling in far lands--fell into sore disorder, so that thieves and evil-doers increased from day to day.

[#] Ascetic.

"'The wise men in their trouble sought diligently for a child having the signs of royalty, and in due time, having found one, Xatrya by name, they gave the king-

dom into his charge. But in that land there dwelt a mighty jin,[#] Vetâla Agni,[#] who, when he heard of what the wise men had done, came forth on the night of the same day the young king had been enthroned and slew him and departed. And it befell that each time the councillors found a new king, lo, the Vetâla Agni came forth and slew him.

[#] Evil spirit.
[#] Spirit of fire.

"'Now upon a certain day, when the wise men, in sore trouble of heart, were met in council, there appeared among them the illustrious Vikramâditya, newly returned from long travel, who, when he had heard what was toward, said: "O ye wise men and faithful, make me king without ado." And the wise men, seeing that Vikramâditya was worthy of that dignity, thus spake: "From this day, O excellency, thou art king of the realm of Avanti." Having in this fashion become king of Avanti, Vikramâditya busied himself all that day with the affairs of his kingdom, tasting the sweets of power; and at the fall of night he prepared, against the visit of the Vetâla Agni, great store of heady liquors, all kinds of meat, fish, bread, confections, rice boiled with milk and honey, sauces, curded milk, butter refined, sandalwood, bouquets and garlands, divers sorts of sweet-scented things; and all these he kept in his palace, and himself remained therein, reclining in full wakefulness upon his fairest bed.

"'Then into this palace came the Vetâla Agni, sword in hand, and went about to slay the august Vikramâditya. But the king said: "Hearken, O Vetâla Agni; seeing that thy excellency has come for to cause me to perish, it is not doubtful that thou wilt succeed in thy purpose; albeit, all these viands thou dost here behold have been brought together for thy behoof; eat, then, whatsoever thou dost find worthy; afterwards thou shalt work thy will." And the Vetâla Agni, having heard these words, filled himself with this great store of food, and, marvellously content with the king, said unto him: "Truly I am content, and well-disposed towards thee, and I give thee the realm of Avanti; sit thou in the highest place and taste its joys; but take heed of one thing: every day shalt thou prepare for me a repast like unto this." With these words, the Vetâla Agni departed from that spot and betook him unto his own place.

"'Then for a long space did Vikramâditya diligently fulfil that command; but by and by growing aweary of feeding the Vetâla Agni, he sought counsel of the jogi Trilokanatha, who had his dwelling on the mount of Kanahakrita. The jogi, perceiving the manifold merits of the incomparable Vikramâditya, was

moved with compassion towards him, and when he had long meditated and recited sundry mantras,[#] he thus spake and said: "Hearken, O king. From the sacred tank of Shakravatar spring alleys four times seven, as it were branches from one trunk, to wit, seven to the north, seven to the east, seven to the west, and seven to the south. Of the seven alleys springing to the north do thou choose the seventh, and in the seventh alley the seventh tree from the sacred tank, and on the seventh branch of the seventh tree thou shalt find the nest of a bulbul. Within that nest thou shalt discover a golden key.'"

[#] Hymns and prayers.

The Babu was now speaking very slowly, and an observer watching Desmond would have perceived that his eyes were fixed with a strange look of mingled eagerness and anxiety upon the story-teller. But no one observed this; every man in the group was intent upon the story, hanging upon the lips of the eloquent Babu.

"'Having obtained the golden key,'" continued the narrator, "'thou shalt return forthwith to thy palace, and the same night, when the Vetâla Agni has eaten and drunk his fill, thou shalt in his presence lay the key upon the palm of thy left hand, thus----'" (here the Babu quietly took up a key hanging from the bunch attached to the warder's girdle, and laid it upon his left palm). "'Then shalt thou say to the Vetâla: "O illustrious Vetâla, tell me, I pray thee, what doth this golden key unlock?" Then if the aspect of the Vetâla be fierce, fear not, for he must needs reply: such is the virtue of the key; and by his words thou shalt direct thy course. Verily it is for such a trial that the gods have endowed thee with wisdom beyond the common lot of men.

"'Vikramâditya performed in all points the jogi's bidding; and having in the presence of the Vetâla laid the golden key upon the palm of his hand, a voice within bade him ask the question: "O Vetâla, what art thou apt to do? What knowest thou?" And the Vetâla answered: "All that I have in my mind, that I am apt to perform. I know all things." And the king said: "Speak, then; what is the number of my years?" And the Vetâla answered: "The years of thy life are a hundred." Then said the king: "I am troubled because in the tale of my years there are two gaps; grant me, then, one year in excess of a hundred, or from the hundred take one." And the Vetâla answered: "O king, thou art in the highest degree good, liberal, merciful, just, lord of thyself, and honoured of gods and Brahmans; the measure of the days that are ordained to fill thy life is full; to add anything thereto, to take anything therefrom, are alike impossible." Having heard these words the

king was satisfied, and the Vetâla departed unto his own place.

"'Upon the night following the king prepared no feast against the coming of the Vetâla, but girt himself for fight. The Vetâla came, and seeing nothing in readiness for the repast, but, on the contrary, all things requisite to a combat, he waxed wroth and said: "O wicked and perverse king, why hast thou made ready nothing for my pleasure this night?" And the king answered: "Since thou canst neither add to my length of years, nor take anything therefrom, why should I make ready a repast for thee continually and without profit?" The Vetâla made answer: "Ho!--'tis thus that thou speakest! Now, truly, come fight with me; this night will I devour thee."

"'At these words the king rose up in wrath to smite the Vetâla, and held him in swift and dexterous combat for a brief space. And the Vetâla, having thus made proof of the might and heroism of the king, and being satisfied, spake and said: "O king, thou art mighty indeed; I am content with thy valour; now, then, ask me what thou wilt." And the king answered: "Seeing that thou art well-disposed towards me, grant me this grace, that when I shall call thee, thou wilt in that same instant stand at my side." And the Vetâla, having granted this grace to the king, departed unto his own place.'"

The Babu waved his hands as a sign that the story was ended. He was damp with perspiration, and in his glance at Desmond there was a kind of furtive appeal for approval.

"Thou speakest well, Babu," said the warder. "But what befell King Bhoya when the graven image had thus ended his saying?"

"That, good jailer, is another story, and if you please to hear it another night I will do my poor best to satisfy you."

"Well, the hour is late." The warder rose to his feet and resumed his official gruffness. "Come, rise; it is time I locked your fetters; and, in good sooth, mine is no golden key."

He chuckled as he watched the prisoners file one by one into the shed. Following them, he quickly locked each in turn to his staple in the wall and went out, bolting and double locking the door behind him.

"You did well, my friend," whispered Desmond in English to the Babu.

"My heart flutters like the wings of a bulbul," answered the Babu; "but I am content, sahib."

"But say, Surendra Nath," remarked one of the Maratha captives, "last time you told us that story you said nothing of the golden key."

"Ah!" replied the Babu, "you are thinking of the story told by the second

graven image in King Vikramâditya's throne. I will tell you that to-morrow."

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

In which our hero is offered freedom at the price of honour; and Mr. Diggle finds that he has no monopoly of quotations.

Next morning, when Desmond left the shed with his fellow-prisoners, he took with him, secreted in a fold of his dhoti, a small piece of clay. It had been given him overnight by the Babu. An hour or two later, happening to be for a moment alone in the tool-shop, he took out the clay and examined it carefully. It was a moment for which he had waited and longed with feverish impatience. The clay was a thin strip, oval in shape, and slightly curved. In the middle of it was the impression, faint but clear, of a key. A footstep approaching, he concealed the clay again in his garment, and, when a workman entered, was busily plying a chisel upon a deal plank.

Before he left the tool-shop, he secreted with the clay a scrap of steel and a small file. That day, and for several days after, whenever chance gave him a minute or two apart from his fellow-workmen, he employed the precious moments in diligently filing the steel to the pattern on the clay. It was slow work: all too tedious for his eager thought. But he worked at his secret task with unfailing patience, and at the week's end had filed the steel to the likeness of the wards of a key.

That night, when his "co-mates in exile" were asleep, he gently inserted the steel in the lock of his ankle-band He tried to turn it. It stuck fast; the wards did not fit. He was not surprised. Before he made the experiment he had felt that it would fail; the key was indeed a clumsy, ill-shapen instrument. But next day he began to work on another piece of steel, and on this he spent every spare minute he could snatch. This time he found himself able to work faster. Night and morning he looked searchingly at the key on the warder's bunch, and afterwards tried to cut the steel to the pattern that was now, as it were, stamped upon his brain.

He wished he could test his second model in the morning light before the warder came, and correct it then. But to do so would involve discovery by his

fellow-captives; the time to take them into his confidence was not yet. He had perforce to wait till dead of night before he could tell whether the changes, more and more delicate and minute, made upon his key during the day were effective. And the Babu was fretful; having done his part, admirably, as Desmond told him, in working the key into his story, he seemed to expect that the rest would be easy, and did not make account of the long labour of the file.

At length a night came when, inserting the key in the lock, Desmond felt it turn easily. Success at last! As he heard the click, he felt an extraordinary sense of elation. Quietly unclasping the fetter, he removed it from his ankle and stood free. If it could be called free--to be shut up in a locked and barred shed in the heart of one of the strongest fortresses in Hindustan! But at least his limbs were at liberty. What a world of difference there was between that and his former state!

Should he inform the Babu? He felt tempted to do so, for it was to Surendra Nath's ingenuity in interpolating the incident of the key into a well-known story that he owed the clay pattern of the warder's key. But Surendra Nath was excitable; he was quite capable of uttering a yell of delight that would waken the other men and force a premature disclosure. Desmond decided to wait for a quiet moment next day before telling the Babu of his success. So he replaced his ankle-band, locked the catch, and lay down to the soundest and most refreshing sleep he had enjoyed for many a night.

He had only just reached the workshop next morning when a peon came with a message that Angria Rao[#] required his instant attendance at the palace. He began to quake in spite of himself. Could the prince have discovered already that the lock of his fetters had been tampered with? Desmond could scarcely believe it. He had made his first test in complete darkness; nothing had broken the silence save the one momentary click; and the warder, when he unloosed him, had not examined the lock. What if he were searched and the precious key were found upon him? It was carefully hidden in a fold of his dhoti. There was no opportunity of finding another hiding-place for it; he must go as he was and trust that suspicion had not been aroused. But it was with a galloping pulse that he followed the peon out of the dockyard, within the walls of the fort, and into the hall where he had had his first interview with the Pirate.

[#] A chief or prince.

His uneasiness was hardly allayed when he saw that Angria was in company with Diggle. Both were squatting on the carpeted dais; no other person was in the room. Having ushered him in, the peon withdrew, and Desmond was alone

with the two men he had most cause to fear. Diggle was smiling, Angria's eyes were gleaming, his mobile lips working as with impatience, if not anxiety.

The Pirate spoke quickly, imperiously.

"You have learnt our tongue, Firangi[#] boy?" he said.

[#] Originally applied by the natives to the Portuguese, then to any European.

"I have done my best, huzur," replied Desmond in Urdu.

"That is well. Now hearken to what I say. You have pleased me; my jamadar[#] speaks well of you; but you are my slave, and, if I will it, you will always be my slave. You would earn your freedom?"

[#] Lieutenant.

"I am in your august hands, huzur," said Desmond diplomatically.

"You may earn your freedom in one way," continued Angria in the same rapid impatient tone. "My scouts report that an English fleet has passed up the coast towards Bombay. My spies tell me that in Bombay a large force is collected under the command of that soor ka batcha[#] Clive. But I cannot learn the purpose of this armament. The dogs may think, having taken my fortress of Suvarndrug, to come and attack me here. Or they may intend to proceed against the French at Hyderabad. It is not convenient for me to remain in this uncertainty. You will go to Bombay and learn these things of which I am in ignorance and come again and tell me. I will then set you free."

[#] Son of a pig.

"I cannot do it, huzur."

Desmond's reply came without a moment's hesitation. To act as a spy upon his own countrymen--how could Angria imagine that an English boy would ever consent to win his freedom on such terms? His simple words roused the Maratha to fury. He sprang to his feet and angrily addressed Diggle, who had also risen, and stood at his side still smiling. Diggle replied to his vehement words in a tone too low for Desmond to catch what he said. Angria turned to the boy again.

"I will not only set you free; I will give you half a lakh of rupees; you shall have a place at my court, or, if you please, I will recommend you to another prince, in whose service you may rise to wealth and honour. If you refuse, I will kill you; no, I will not kill you, for death is sweet to a slave; I will inflict on you the tortures I reserve for those who provoke my anger: you shall lose your ears, your nose, and----"

Diggle again interposed.

"Pardon me, bhai[#]," Desmond heard him say, "that is hardly the way to deal with a boy of my nation. If you will deign to leave him to me, I think that in a little I shall find means to overcome his hesitation."

[#] Brother.

"But even then, how can I trust the boy? He may give his word to escape me; then betray me to his countrymen. I have no faith in the Firangi."

"Believe me, if he gives his word he will keep it. That is the way with us."

"It is not your way."

"I am no longer of them," said Diggle with consummate aplomb. "Dismiss him now; I will do my best with him."

"Then you must hasten. I give you three days: if within that time he has not consented, I will do to him all that I have said, and more also."

"I do not require three days to make up my mind," said Desmond quietly. "I cannot do what----"

"Hush, you young fool!" cried Diggle angrily in English. Turning to the Pirate he added: "The boy is as stiff-necked as a pig; but even a pig can be led if you ring his snout. I beg you leave him to me."

"Take him away!" exclaimed Angria, clapping his hands. Two attendants came in answer to his summons, and Desmond was led off and escorted by them to his workshop.

Angry and disgusted as he was with both the Maratha and Diggle, he was still more anxious at this unexpected turn in his affairs. He had but three days! If he had not escaped before the fourth day dawned, his fate would be the most terrible that could befall a living creature. The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel! He had seen, among the prisoners, some of the victims of Angria's cruelty; they had suffered tortures too terrible to be named, and dragged out a life of unutterable degradation and misery, longing for death as a blissful end. With his quick imagination he already felt the hands of the torturers upon him; and for all the self-control which his life in Gheria had induced, he was for some moments

so wholly possessed by terror that he could scarcely endure the consciousness of existence.

But when the first tremors were past, and he began to go about his usual tasks, and was able to think calmly, not for an instant did he waver in his resolve. Betray his countrymen! It was not to be thought of. Give his word to Angria and then forswear himself! Ah! Even Diggle knew that he would not do that. Freedom, wealth, a high place in some prince's court! He would buy none of them at the price of his honour. Diggle was false, unspeakably base; let him do Angria's work if he would; Desmond Burke would never stoop to it.

He scarcely argued the matter explicitly with himself: it was settled in Angria's presence by his instinctive repulsion. But it was not in a boy like Desmond, young, strong, high-spirited, tamely to fold his hands before adverse fate. He had three days: it would go hard with him if he did not make good use of them. He felt a glow of thankfulness that the first step, and that a difficult one, had been taken, providentially as it seemed, the very night before this crisis in his fate. His future plan had already outlined itself; it was necessary first to gain over his companions in captivity; that done, he hoped within the short period allowed him to break prison and turn his back for ever on this place of horror.

It seemed to his eager impatience that that day would never end. It was November, and the beginning of the cold season, and the work of the dockyard, being urgent, was carried on all day without the usual break during the hot middle hours, so that he found no opportunity of consulting his fellows. Further, the foremen of the yard were specially active. The Pirate had been for some time fearful lest the capture of Suvarndrug should prove to be the prelude to an assault upon his stronger fort and headquarters at Gheria, and to meet the danger he had had nine new vessels laid down. Three of them had been finished, but the work had been much interrupted by the rains, and the delay in the completion of the remaining six had irritated him. He had visited his displeasure upon the foremen. After his interview with Desmond he summoned them to his presence and threatened them with such dire punishment if the work was not more rapidly pushed or that they had used the lash more furiously and with even less discrimination than ever. Consequently when Desmond met his companions in the shed at night he found them all in desperate indignation and rage. He had seen nothing more of Diggle; he must strike while the iron was hot.

When they were locked in, and all was quiet outside, the prisoners gave vent, each in his own way, to their feelings. For a time Desmond listened, taking no part in their lamentation and cursing. But when the tide of impotent fury ebbed, and there was a lull, he said quietly:

"Are my brothers dogs that, suffering these things, they merely whine?"

The quiet level tones, so strangely contrasting with the tones of fierceness

and hate that were still ringing in the ears of the unhappy prisoners, had an extraordinary effect. There was dead silence in the shed: it seemed that every man was afraid to speak. Then one of the Marathas said in a whisper:

"What do you mean, sahib?"

"What do I mean? Surely it must be clear to any man. Have we not sat long enough on the carpet of patience?"

Again the silence remained for a space unbroken.

"You, Gulam Mahomed," continued Desmond, addressing one of the Biluchis whom he considered the boldest--"have you never thought of escape?"

"Allah knows!" said the man in an undertone. "But he knows that I remember what happened a year ago. Fuzl Khan can tell the sahib something about that."

A fierce cry broke from the Gujarati, who had been moaning upon his charpoy in anguish from the lashings he had undergone that day. Desmond heard him spring up; but if he had meant to attack the Biluchi, the clashing of his fetters reminded him of his helplessness. He cursed the man, demanding what he meant.

"Nothing," returned Gulam Mahomed. "But you were the only man, Allah knows, who escaped the executioner."

"Pig, and son of a pig!" cried Fuzl Khan, "I knew nothing of the plot. If any man says I did he lies. They did it without me; some evil jin must have heard their whisperings. They failed. They were swine of Canarese."

"Do not let us quarrel," said Desmond. "We are all brothers in misfortune; we ought to be as close-knit as the strands of a rope. Here is our brother Fuzl Khan, the only man of his gang who did not try to escape, and see how he is treated! Could he be worse misused? Would not death be a boon? Is it not so, Fuzl Khan?"

The Gujarati assented with a passionate cry.

"As for the rest of us, it is only a matter of time. I am the youngest of you, and not the hardest worked, yet I feel that the strain of our toil is wearing me out. What must it be with you? You are dying slowly. If we make an attempt to escape and fail we shall die quickly, that is all the difference. What is to be is written, is it not so, Shaik Abdullah?"

"Even so, sahib," replied the second Biluchi, "it is written. Who can escape his fate?"

"And what do you say, Surendra Nath?"

"The key, sahib," whispered the Babu in English; "what of the key?"

"Speak in Urdu, Babu," said Desmond quickly. "Don't agree at once."

Surendra Nath was quick-witted; he perceived that Desmond did not wish the others to suspect that there had been any confidences between them.

"I am a coward, the sahib knows," he said in Urdu. "I could not give blows;

I should die. It was told us to-day that the English are about to attack this fort. They will set us free; we need run no risks."

"Wah!" exclaimed one of the Mysoreans. "If the Firangi get into the fort we shall all be murdered."

"That is truth," said a Maratha. "The Rao would have our throats cut at once."

The Babu groaned.

"You see, Surendra Nath, it is useless to wait in the hope of help from my countrymen," said Desmond. "If there is fighting to be done, we can do all that is needed: is it not so, my brothers? As for you, Babu, if you would sooner die without--well, there is nothing to prevent you."

"If the sahib does not wish me to fight, it is well. But has the sahib a plan?"

"Yes, I have a plan."

He paused; there was a sound of hard breathing.

"Tell it us," said the Gujarati eagerly.

"You are one of us, Fuzl Khan?"

"The plan! the plan! Is not my back mangled? Have I not endured the tank? Is not freedom sweet to me as to another? The plan, sahib! I swear, I Fuzl Khan, to be true to you and all; only tell me the plan."

"You shall have the plan in good time. First, I have a thing to say. When a battle is to be fought, no soldier fights only for himself, doing that which seems good to him alone. He looks to his captain for orders. Otherwise mistakes would be made, and all effort would be wasted. We must have a captain: who is he to be?"

"Yourself, sahib," said the Gujarati at once. "You have spoken; you have the plan; we take you as leader."

"You hear what Fuzl Khan says. Do you all agree?"

The others assented eagerly. Then Desmond told his wondering hearers the secret of the key, and during several hours of that quiet night he discussed with them in whispers the details of the scheme which he had worked out. At intervals the sentry passed and flashed his light through the opening in the wall; but at these moments every man was lying motionless upon his charpoy, and not a sound was audible save a snore.

Next day when Desmond, having finished his mid-day meal of rice and mangoes, had returned to his workshop, Diggle sauntered in.

"Ah, my young friend," he said in his quiet voice and with his usual smile, "doubtless you have expected a visit from me. Night brings counsel. I did not visit you yesterday, thinking that after sleeping over the amiable and generous proposition made to you by my friend Angria you would view it in another light. I trust that during the nocturnal hours you have come to perceive the advantages of choosing the discreet part. Let us reason together."

There were several natives with them in the workshop, but none of them understood English, and the two Englishmen could talk at ease.

"Reason!" said Desmond in reply to Diggle's last sentence. "If you are going to talk of what your pirate friend spoke of yesterday, it is mere waste of time. I shall never agree."

"Words, my young friend, mere words! You will be one of us yet. You will never have such a chance again. Why, in a few years you will be able to return to England, if you will, a rich man, a very nawab.[#] My friend Angria has his faults; 'nemo est sine culpa': but he is at least generous. An instance! The man who took the chief part in the capture of the Dutchman two years ago--what is he now? A naib,[#] a man of wealth, of high repute at the Nizam's court. There is no reason why you should not follow so worthy an example; cut out an Indiaman or two, and Desmond Burke may, if he will, convey a shipload of precious things to the shores of Albion, and enjoy his leisured dignity on a landed estate of his own. He shall drive a coach while his oaf of a brother perspires behind a plough."

[#] Governor.

[#] Deputy-governor.

Desmond was silent. Diggle watched him keenly, and after a slight pause continued:

"This is no great thing that is asked of you. You sail on one of Angria's grabs; you are set upon the shore; you enter Bombay with a likely story of escape from the fortress of the Pirate; you are a hero, the boon fellow of the men, the pet of the ladies--for there are ladies in Bombay, 'forma praestante puellae.' In a week you know everything, all the purposes that Angria's spies have failed to discover. One day you disappear; the ladies wail and tear their hair, a tiger has eaten you! in a week you will be forgotten. But you are back in Angria's fortress, no longer a slave, down-trodden and despised; but a free man, a rich man, a potentate to be. Is it not worth thinking of, my young friend, especially when you remember the other side of the picture? It is a dark side; an unpleasant side; even, let me confess, horrible: I prefer to keep it to the wall."

He waved his gloved hand deprecatingly, watching Desmond with the same intentness. The boy was dumb; he might also have been deaf. Diggle drew from his fob an elaborately chased snuff-box and took a pinch of fine rappee, Desmond mechanically noticing that the box bore ornamentation of Dutch design.

"If I were not your friend," continued Diggle, "I might say that your attitude is one of sheer obstinacy. Why not trust us? You see we trust you. I stand pledged

for you with Angria; but I flatter myself I know a man when I see one: 'si fractus illabitur orbis'--you have already shown your mettle. Of course I understand your scruples; I was young myself once; I know the generous impulses that rule the hearts of youth. But this is a matter that must be decided, not by feeling, but by hard fact and cold reason. Who benefits by your scruples? A set of hard-living money-grubbers in Bombay who fatten on the oppression of the ryot, who tithe mint and anice and cummin, who hoard up treasure which they will take back with their jaundiced livers to England, there to become pests to society with their splenetic and domineering tempers. What's the Company to you, or you to the Company? Why, Governor Pitt was an interloper; and your own father: yes, he was an interloper, and an interloper of the best."

"But not a pirate," said Desmond hotly, his scornful silence yielding at last.

"True, true," said Diggle suavely; "but in the Indies, you see, we don't draw fine distinctions. We are all buccaneers in a sense; some with the sword, others the ledger. Throw in your lot frankly with me; I will stand your friend----"

"You are wasting your breath and your eloquence," interrupted Desmond firmly, "and even if I were tempted to agree, as I never could be, I should remember who is talking to me." Then he added with a whimsical smile, "Come, Mr. Diggle, you are fond of quotations; I am not; but there's one I remember--'I fear the Greeks, even----'"

"You young hound!" cried Diggle, his sallow face becoming purple. His anger, it seemed to Desmond afterwards reflecting on it, was out of proportion to the cause of offence. "You talk of my eloquence. By Heaven, when I see you again I will use it otherwise. You shall hear something of how Angria wreaks his vengeance; you shall have a foretaste of the sweets in store for an obstinate recalcitrant pigheaded fool!"

He strode away, leaving Desmond a prey to the gloomiest anticipations.

That evening, when the prisoners were squatting outside the shed for the usual hour of talk before being locked up for the night, a new feature was added to the entertainment. One of the Marathas had somehow possessed himself of a tom-tom, and proved himself an excellent performer on that weird instrument. While he tapped its sides, his fellow Maratha, in a strange hard tuneless voice, chanted a song, repeating its single stanza again and again without apparently wearying his hearers, and clapping his hands to mark the time. It was a song about a banya[#] with a beautiful young daughter-in-law, whom he appointed to deal out the daily handful of flour expected as alms by every beggar who passed his door. Her hands being much smaller than his own, he pleased himself with the idea that, without losing his reputation for charity, he would give away through her much less grain than if he himself performed the charitable office. But it turned out bad thrift, for so beautiful was she that she attracted to the door not only the genuine beggars,

but also many, both young and old, who had disguised themselves in mendicant rags for the mere pleasure of beholding her and getting from her a smile and a gentle word. It was a popular song, and the warder himself was tempted to stay and listen until, the hour for locking up being past, he at last recollected his duty and bundled the prisoners into the shed.

[#] Hindu merchant.

"Sing inside if you must," he said, "but not too loud, lest the overseer come with the bamboo."

Inside the shed, reclining on their charpoys, the men continued their performance, changing their song, though not, as it seemed to Desmond, the tune. He, however, was perhaps not sufficiently attentive to the monotonous strains, for, as soon as the warder had left the yard, he had unlocked his fetters and begun to work in the darkness. Poised on one of the rafters, he held on with one hand to a joist, and with the other plied a small saw, well greased with ghi. The sound of the slow careful movements of the tool was completely drowned by the singing and the hollow rat-a-pan of the tom-tom. Beneath him stood the Babu, extending his dhoti like an apron, and catching in it the falling shower of sawdust.

Suddenly the figure on the rafter gave a low whistle. Through the window he had seen the dim form of the sentry outside approach the space lighted by the rays from the lantern, which he had laid down at a corner of the shed. Before the soldier had time to lift it and throw a beam into the shed (which he did as much from curiosity to see the untiring performers as in the exercise of his duty) Desmond had swung down from his perch and stretched himself upon the nearest charpoy. The Babu meanwhile had darted with his folded dhoti to the darkest corner. When the sentry peered in, the two performing Marathas were sitting up; the rest were lying prone, to all appearance soothed to sleep.

"Verily thou wilt rap a hole in the tom-tom," said the sentry with a grin. "Better save a little of it for to-morrow."

"Sleep is far from my eyes," replied the man. "My comrades are all at rest; if it does not offend thee----"

"No. Tap till it burst, for me. But without sleep the work will be hard in the morning."

He went away. Instantly the two figures were again upon their feet, and the sawing recommenced. For three hours the work continued, interrupted at intervals by the visits of the sentry. Midnight was past before Desmond, with cramped limbs and aching head, gave the word for the song and accompaniment

to cease, and the shed was in silence.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

In which Mr. Diggle illustrates his argument; and there are strange doings in Gheria harbour.

The morning of the third day dawned--the last of the three allowed Desmond for making up his mind. When the other prisoners were loosed from their fetters and marched off under guard to their usual work, he alone was left. Evidently he was to be kept in confinement with a view to quickening his resolution. Some hours passed. About midday he heard footsteps approaching the shed. The door was opened, and in the entrance Diggle appeared.

"You will excuse me," he said with a sniff, "if I remain on the threshold of your apartment. It is, I fear, but imperfectly aired."

He pulled a charpoy to the door, and sat down upon it, as much outside as within. Taking out his snuff-box, he tapped it, took a pinch, savoured it, and added:

"You will find the apartment prepared for you in my friend Angria's palace somewhat sweeter than this your present abode--somewhat more commodious also."

Desmond, reclining at a distance, looked his enemy calmly and steadily in the face.

"If you have come, Mr. Diggle," he said, "merely to repeat what you said yesterday, let me say at once that it is waste of breath. I have not changed my mind."

"No, not to repeat, my young friend. 'Crambe repetita'--you know the phrase? Yesterday I appealed, in what I had to say, to your reason; either my appeal, or your reason, was at fault. To-day I have another purpose. 'Tis pity to come down to a lower plane; to appeal to the more ignoble part of man; but since you have not yet cut your wisdom teeth I must e'en accommodate myself. Angria is my friend; but there are moments, look you, when the bonds of our friendship are put to a heavy strain. At those moments Angria is perhaps most himself, and I, perhaps, am most myself; which might prove to a philosopher that

there is a radical antagonism between the Oriental and the Occidental character. Since my picture of the brighter side has failed to impress you, I propose to show you the other side--such is the sincerity of my desire for your welfare. And 'tis no empty picture--'inanis imago,' as Ovid might say--no, 'tis sheer reality, speaking, terrible."

He turned and beckoned. In a moment Desmond heard the clank of chains, and by and by, at the entrance of the shed, stood a figure at sight of whom his blood ran cold. It was the bent, lean, broken figure of a Hindu, his thin bare legs weighted with heavy irons. Ears, nose, upper lip were gone; his eyes were lit with the glare of madness; the parched skin of his hollow cheeks was drawn back, disclosing a grinning mouth and yellow teeth. His arms and legs were like sticks; both hands had lost their thumbs; his feet were twisted; straggling wisps of grey hair escaped from his turban. Standing there beside Diggle, he began to mop and mow, uttering incomprehensible gibberish.

Diggle waved him away.

"That, my dear boy, illustrates the darker side of Angria's character--the side which forbids me to call Angria unreservedly my friend. A year ago that man was as straight as you; he had all his organs and dimensions; he was rich, and of importance in his little world. To-day--but you have seen him: it boots not to attempt in words to say what the living image has already said. And within twenty-four hours, unless you come to a better mind, even as that man is, so will you be."

He rose slowly to his feet, bending upon Desmond a look of mournful interest and compassion. Desmond had stood all but transfixed with horror. But as Diggle now prepared to leave him, the boy flushed hot; his fists clenched; his eyes flashed with indignation.

"You fiend!" was all he said.

Diggle smiled, and sauntered carelessly away.

That night, when the prisoners were brought as usual to the shed, and warder and sentries were out of earshot, Desmond told them what he had seen.

"It must be to-night, my brothers," he said in conclusion. "We have no longer time. Before sunrise to-morrow we must be out of this evil place. We must work, work, for life and liberty."

This night again the singer sang untiringly, the tom-tom accompanying him with its weird hollow notes. And in the blackness, Desmond worked as he had never worked before, plying his saw hour after hour, never forgetting his caution, running no risks when he had warning of the sentry's approach. And hour after hour the shower of sawdust fell noiselessly into the Babu's outspread dhoti. Then suddenly the beating of the tom-tom ceased, the singer's voice died away on a lingering wail, and the silence of the night was unbroken save by the melancholy

howl of a distant jackal, and the call of sentry to sentry as at intervals they went their rounds.

At midnight the guard was relieved. The new-comer--a tall, thin, lanky Maratha--arriving at Desmond's shed, put his head in at the little window-space, and flashed his lantern from left to right more carefully than the man whom he had just replaced. The nine forms lay flat or curled up on their charpoys--all was well.

Coming back an hour later, he fancied he heard a slight sound within the shed. He went to the window and peered in, flashing his lantern as before from left to right. But as he did so, he felt upon his throat a grip as of steel. He struggled to free himself; his cry was stifled ere it was uttered; his matchlock fell with a clatter to the ground. He was like a child in the hands of his captor, and when the Gujarati in a fierce low whisper said to him: "Yield, hound, or I choke you!" his struggles ceased and he stood trembling in sweat.

But now came the sentries' call, passed from man to man around the circuit of the fort.

"Answer the call!" whispered the Gujarati, with a significant squeeze of the man's windpipe.

When his turn arrived, the sentry took up the word, but it was a thin quavering call that barely reached the next man a hundred yards away.

While this brief struggle had been going on, a light figure within the shed had mounted to the rafters and, gently feeling for and twisting round a couple of wooden pins, handed down to his companions below a section of the roof some two feet square, which had been kept in its place only by these temporary supports. The wood was placed silently on the floor. Then the figure above crawled out upon the roof, and let himself down by the aid of a rope held by the two Biluchis within. It was a pitch-dark night; nothing broke the blackness save the scattered points of light from the sentries' lanterns. Stepping to the side of the half-garrotted Maratha, who was leaning passively against the shed, the sinewy hand of the Gujarati still pressed upon his windpipe, Desmond thrust a gag into his mouth and with quick deft movements bound his hands. Now he had cause to thank the destiny that had made him Bulger's shipmate; he had learnt from Bulger how to tie a sailor's knot.

Scarcely had he bound the sentry's hands when he was joined by one of his fellow-prisoners, and soon seven of them stood with him in the shadow of the shed. The last man, the Gujarati, had held the rope while the Babu descended. There was no one left to hold the rope for him, but he swung himself up to the roof and climbed down on the shoulders of one of the Biluchis. Meanwhile the sentry, whose lantern had been extinguished and from the folds of whose garments his flint and tinder-box had been taken, had now been completely trussed up, and lay

helpless and perforce silent against the wall of the shed. From the time when the hapless man first felt the grip of the Gujarati upon his throat scarcely five minutes had elapsed.

Now the party of nine moved in single file, swiftly and silently on their bare feet, under the wall of the fort towards the north-east bastion, gliding like phantoms in the gloom. Each man bore his burden: the Babu carried the dark lantern; one of the Marathas the coil of rope; the other the sentry's matchlock and ammunition; several had small bundles containing food, secreted during the past three days from their rations.

Suddenly the leader stopped. They had reached the foot of the narrow flight of steps leading up into the bastion. Just above them was a sentinel. The pause was but for a moment. The plan of action had been thought out and discussed. On hands and knees the Gujarati crept up the steps; at his heels followed Desmond in equal stealth and silence. At the top, hardly distinguishable from the blackness of the sky, the sentinel was leaning against the parapet, looking out to sea. Many a night had he held that post, and seen the stars, and listened to the rustle of the surf; many a night he had heard the call of the sentry next below, and passed it to the man on the bastion beyond; but never a night had he seen anything but the stars and the dim forms of vessels in the harbour, heard anything but the hourly call of his mates and the eternal voice of the sea. He was listless, bemused. What was it, then, that made him suddenly spring erect? What gave him that strange uneasiness? He had heard nothing, seen nothing, yet he faced round, and stood at the head of the steps with his back to the sea. The figures prone below him felt that he was looking towards them. They held their breath. Both were on the topmost step but one; only a narrow space separated them from the sentinel; they could hear the movement of his jaws as he chewed his pan supari.[#] Thus a few moments passed. Desmond's pulse beat in a fever of impatience; every second was precious. Then the sentinel moved; his uneasiness seemed to be allayed; he began to hum a Maratha camp song, and, half turning, glanced once more out to sea.

[#] Nut of the areca palm wrapped in the leaf of the betel plant.

The moment was come. Silently Fuzl Khan rose to his feet; he sprang forward with the lightness, the speed, the deadly certainty of a Thug[#]; his hand was on the man's throat. Desmond, close behind, had a gag ready, but there was no need to use it. In the open the Gujarati could exert his strength more freely than through the narrow window of the shed. Almost before Desmond reached his side the

sentinel was dead. In that desperate situation there was no time to expostulate. While the Gujarati laid the hapless man gently beside the gun that peeped through the embrasure of the parapet, Desmond picked up the sentinel's matchlock, ran softly back, and summoned his companions. They came silently up the steps. To fasten the rope securely to the gun-carriage was the work of a few instants; then the Gujarati mounted the parapet, and, swarming down the rope, sank into the darkness. One by one the men followed; it came to the Babu's turn. Trembling with excitement and fear he shrank back.

[#] Name of a class of hereditary stranglers.

"I am afraid, sahib," he said.

Without hesitation Desmond drew up the rope and looped the end.

"Get into the loop," he whispered.

The Babu trembled but obeyed, and, assisting him to climb the parapet, Desmond lowered him slowly to the foot of the wall. Then he himself descended last of all, and on the rocks below the little group was complete. They were free! But the most difficult part of their enterprise was yet to come. Behind them was the curtain of the fort; before them a short, shelving rocky beach and the open sea.

No time was wasted. Walking two by two for mutual support over the rough ground, the party set off towards the jetty. They kept as close as possible to the wall, so that they would not be seen if a sentinel should happen to look over the parapet; and being barefooted, the slight sound they might make would be inaudible through the never-ceasing swish of the surf. Their feet were cut by the sharp edges of the rocks; many a bruise they got; but they kept on their silent way without a murmur.

Reaching the angle of the wall, they had now perforce to leave its shelter, for their course led past the outskirts of the native town across a comparatively open space. Fortunately the night was very dark, and here and there on the shore were boats and small huts which afforded some cover. The tide was on the ebb; and, when they at length struck the jetty, it was at a point some twenty yards from its shoreward end. Groping beneath it they halted for a moment, then the two Marathas separated themselves from the rest, and, with a whispered word of farewell, disappeared like shadows into the blackness. The sea was not for them; they would take their chance on land.

From a point some distance beyond the end of the jetty shone a faint glimmer of light. Desmond silently drew the Gujarati's attention to it.

"They are gambling," whispered the man.

"So much the better for our chances," thought Desmond. Turning to the Babu he whispered: "Now, Surendra Nath, you know what to do?"

"Yes, sahib."

Placing their bundles in the woodwork supporting the jetty, five members of the party--the Biluchis, the Mysoreans, and the Babu--stole away in the darkness. Desmond and the Gujarati were left alone. The Babu placed himself near the end of the jetty to keep guard. The two Mysoreans struck off thence obliquely for a few yards until they came to a rude open shed in which the Pirate's carpenters were wont to work during the rains. From a heap of shavings they drew a small but heavy barrel. Carrying this between them they made their way with some difficulty back towards the jetty, where they rejoined the Babu. Meanwhile the Biluchis had returned some distance along the path by which they had come from the fort, then turned off to the left, and came to a place where a number of small boats were drawn up just above high water. The boats were the ordinary tonis[#] of the coast, each propelled by short scull paddles. Moving quickly but with great caution the Biluchis collected the paddles from all these boats save one, carried them noiselessly down to the water's edge, waded a few yards into the surf, and setting down their burdens, pushed them gently seawards. They then returned to the one boat which they had not robbed of its paddle, and lay down beside it, apparently waiting.

[#] Small boats cut out of the solid tree, used for passing between the shore and larger vessels.

By and by they were joined by the Mysoreans. The four men lifted the toni, and carrying it down to the jetty, quietly launched it under the shadow of the woodwork. A few yards away the Babu sat upon the barrel. This was lifted on board, and one of the men, tearing a long strip from his dhoti, muffled the single paddle. Then all five men squatted at the water-side, awaiting with true Oriental patience the signal for further action.

Not one of them but was aware that the plight of the two sentries they had left behind them in the fort might at any moment be discovered. The hourly call must be nearly due. When no response came from the sentry whose beat ended at their shed the alarm would at once be given, and in a few seconds the silent form of the sentinel on the bastion would be found, and the whole garrison would be sped to their pursuit. But at this moment of suspense only the Babu was agitated. His natural timidity, and the tincture of European ways of thought he had gained during his service in Calcutta, rendered him less subject than his

Mohammedan companions to the fatalism which rules the Oriental mind. To the Mohammedan what must be must be. Allah has appointed to every man his lot; man is but as a cork on the stream of fate. Not even when a low, half-strangled cry came to them across the water, out of the blackness that brooded upon the harbour, did any of the four give sign of excitement. The Babu started, and rose to his feet shivering; the others still squatted, mute and motionless as statues of ebony, neither by gesture nor murmur betraying their consciousness that at any moment, by tocsin from the fort, a thousand fierce and relentless warriors might be launched like sleuth-hounds upon their track.

Meanwhile, what of Desmond and the Gujarati?

During the months Desmond had spent in Gheria he had made himself familiar, as far as his opportunities allowed, with the construction of the harbour and the manner of mooring the vessels there. He knew that the gallivats of the Pirate's fleet, lashed together, lay about eighty yards from the head of the jetty under the shelter of the fortress rock, which protected them from the worst fury of the south-west monsoon. The grabs lay on the other side of the jetty, some hundred and twenty yards towards the river--except three vessels which were held constantly ready for sea somewhat nearer the harbour mouth.

He had learnt, moreover, by cautious and apparently casual inquiries, that the gallivats were under a guard of ten men, the grabs of twenty. These men were only relieved at intervals of three days; they slept on board when the vessels were in harbour and the crews dispersed ashore.

In thinking over the difficult problem of escape, Desmond had found himself in a state of perplexity somewhat similar to that of the man who had to convey a fox and a goose and a bag of corn across a river in a boat that would take but one at a time. He could not, with his small party, man a gallivat, which required fifty oarsmen to propel it at speed; while if he seized one of the lighter grabs, he would have no chance whatever of outrunning the gallivats that would be immediately launched in pursuit. It was this problem that had occupied him the whole day during which Diggle had fondly imagined he was meditating on Angria's offer of freedom.

A few moments after their five companions had left them, Desmond and the Gujarati climbed with the agility of seamen along the ties of the framework supporting the jetty, until they reached a spot a yard or two from the end. There, quite invisible from sea or land, they gently lowered themselves into the water. Guided by the dim light which he had noticed, and which he knew must proceed from one of the moored gallivats, Desmond struck out towards the farther end of the line of vessels, swimming a noiseless breast stroke. Fuzl Khan followed him

in equal silence a length behind. The water was warm. A few minutes' steady swimming brought them within twenty or thirty yards of the light. The hulls of the gallivats and their tall raking spars could now be seen looming up out of the blackness. Desmond perceived that the light was on the outermost of the line, and, treading water for a moment, he caught the low hum of voices coming from the after part of the gallivat. Striking out to the left, still followed by the Gujarati, he swam along past the sterns of the lashed vessels until he came under the side of the one nearest the shore. He caught at the hempen cable, swarmed up it, and, the gallivat having but little freeboard, soon reached the bulwark. There he paused to recover his breath and to listen. Hearing nothing, he quietly slipped over the side and lay on the maindeck. In a few seconds he was joined by his companion. In the shadow of the bulwarks the two groped their way cautiously along the deck. Presently Desmond, who was in front, struck his foot against some object invisible to him. There was a grunt beneath him. The two paused, Fuzl Khan nervously fingering the knife he had taken from the sentinel on the bastion. The grunt was repeated; but the intruders remained still as death, and with a sleepy grumble the man who had been disturbed turned over on his charpoy, placed transversely across the deck, and fell asleep.

All was quiet. Once more the two moved forward. They came to the ropes by which the vessel was lashed to the next in the line. For a moment Desmond stood irresolute; then he led the way swiftly and silently to the deck of the adjacent gallivat, crossed it without mishap, and so across the third. Fortunately both were sailors, accustomed to finding their way on ship-board in the night, as much by sense of touch as by sight. Being barefooted, only the sharpest ears, deliberately on the alert, could have detected them.

They had now reached the fourth of the line of vessels. It was by far the largest of the fleet, and for this reason Desmond had guessed that it would have been chosen for his quarters by the serang[#] in charge of the watch. If he could secure this man he felt that his hazardous enterprise would be half accomplished. This was indeed the pivot on which the whole scheme turned, for in no other way would it be possible to seize the ten men on board the gallivats without raising such an alarm as must shock fort, city, and harbour to instant activity. And it was necessary to Desmond's plan, not only to secure the serang, but to secure him alive.

[#] Head of a crew.

The gallivat was Angria's own vessel, used in his visits up-river to his country

house, and, during calm weather, in occasional excursions to Suvarndrug and the other forts on the sea-coast. As Desmond was aware, it boasted a large state-cabin aft, and he thought it very probable that the serang had appropriated this for his watch below.

Pausing a moment as they reached the vessel to make sure that no one was stirring, Desmond and Fuzl Khan crept on to its deck and threw themselves down, again listening intently. From the last vessel of the line came the sound of low voices, accompanied at intervals by the click of the oblong bone dice with which the men were gambling. This was a boon, for when the Indian, a born gambler, is engaged in one of his games of chance, he is oblivious of all else around him. But on Angria's gallivat there was no sound. Rising to a crouching position, so that his form could not be seen if any of the gamblers chanced to look in his direction, Desmond slowly crept aft, halting at every few steps to listen. Still there was no sound. But all at once he caught sight of a faint glow ahead; what was it? For a few seconds he was puzzled. As he approached, the glow took shape; he saw that it was the entrance to the cabin, the sliding door being half open. Creeping to the darker side, careful not to come within the radius of the light, he stood erect, and again listened. From within came the snores of a sleeper. Now he felt sure that his guess had been correct, for none but the serang would dare to occupy the cabin, and even he would no doubt have cause to tremble if his presumption should come to the Pirate's ears.

Keeping his body as much in the shadow as possible, Desmond craned his head forward and peeped into the cabin. He could see little or nothing; the light came from a small oil lantern with its face turned to the wall. Made of some vegetable substance, the oil gave off a pungent smell. The lantern was no doubt carried by the serang in his rounds of inspection; probably he kept it within reach at night; he must be sleeping in the black shadow cast by it. To locate a sound is always difficult; but, as far as Desmond could judge, the snores came from the neighbourhood of the lantern and as from the floor.

He stepped back again into complete darkness. The Gujarati was at his elbow.

"Wait, Fuzl Khan," said Desmond in the lowest of whispers. "I must go in and see where the man is and how the cabin is arranged."

The Gujarati crouched in the shadow of the bulwarks. Desmond, dropping on hands and knees, crawled slowly forward into the cabin towards the light. It was slightly above him, probably on a raised divan,--the most likely place for the serang to choose as his bed. In a few moments Desmond's outstretched fingers touched the edge of the little platform; the light was still nearly two yards away. Still he was unable to see the sleeper, though by the sound of his breathing he must be very near. Desmond feared that every movement might bring him into contact

with the man. Whatever the risk, it was necessary to obtain a little more light. Slightly raising himself he found that, without actually mounting the platform, he could just reach the lamp with outstretched fingers. Very slowly he pushed it round, so that the light fell more directly into the room. Then he was able to see, about four feet away, curled up on the divan, with his arms under his head, the form of a man. There was no other in the cabin. Having discovered all that he wished to know, Desmond crawled backward as carefully as he had come.

At the moment of the discovery he had felt the eager boy's impulse to spring upon the sleeper at once, but although his muscles had been hardened by a year of toil he doubted whether he had sufficient physical strength to make absolutely sure of his man; a single cry, the sound of a scuffle, might be fatal. The Gujarati, on the other hand, a man of great bulk, could be trusted to overpower the victim by sheer weight, and with his iron clutch to ensure that no sound came from him. Desmond's only fear indeed was that the man, as in the case of the sentinel on the bastion, might overdo his part and give him all too thorough a quietus.

He came to the entrance of the cabin. His appearance brought the Gujarati to his side.

"Remember, Fuzl Khan," he whispered, "we must keep the serang alive; not even stun him. You understand?"

"I know, sahib."

Drawing him silently into the apartment and to the edge of the platform, Desmond again crept to the lantern, and now turned it gradually still farther inwards until the form of the sleeper could be distinctly seen. The light was still dim; but it occurred to Desmond that the glow, increased now that the lantern was turned round, might attract the attention of the gamblers on the gallivat at the end of the line. So, while the Gujarati stood at the platform, ready to pounce on the sleeper as a cat on a mouse if he made the least movement, Desmond tiptoed to the door and began to close the sliding panel. It gave a slight creak; the sleeper stirred; Desmond quickly pushed the panel home, and as he did so the serang sat up, rubbing his eyes and looking in sleepy suspicion towards the lantern. While his knuckles were still at his eyes Fuzl Khan was upon him. A brief scuffle, almost noiseless, on the linen covering of the divan; a heavy panting for breath; then silence. The Gujarati relaxed his grip on the man's throat; he made another attempt to cry out; but the firm fingers tightened their pressure and the incipient cry was choked in a feeble gurgle. Once more the hapless serang tried to rise; Fuzl Khan pressed him down and shook him vigorously. He saw that it was useless to resist, and lay limp and half-throttled in his captor's hands.

By this time Desmond had turned the lantern full upon the scene. Coming to the man's head, while the Gujarati still held him by the throat, he said, in low, rapid, but determined tones:

"Obey, and your life will be spared. But if you attempt to raise an alarm you will be lost. Answer my questions. Where is there some loose rope on board?"

The man hesitated to reply, but a squeeze from the Gujarati decided him.

"There is a coil near the main mast," he said.

Desmond slipped out, and in a few seconds returned with several yards of thin coir, a strong rope made of cocoa-nut fibre. Soon the serang lay bound hand and foot.

"What are the names of the men on the furthest vessel?"

"They are Rama, Sukharam, Ganu, Ganpat, Hari."

"Call Rama gently; bid him come here. Do not raise your voice."

The man obeyed. The clicking of the dice ceased, and in a few moments a Maratha appeared at the doorway and entered blinking. No sooner had he set foot within the cabin than he was seized by the Gujarati and gagged, and then, with a rapidity only possible to the practised sailor, he was roped and laid helpless on the floor.

"Call Sukharam," said Desmond.

The second man answered the summons, only to suffer the same fate. A third was dealt with in the same fashion; then the fourth and fifth came together, wondering why the serang was so brutally interfering with their game. By the time they reached the door Desmond had turned the lantern to the wall, so that they saw only a dim shape within the cabin. Ganpat was secured before the last man became aware of what was happening. Hari hesitated at the threshold, hearing the sound of the slight scuffle caused by the seizure of his companion.

"Tell him to come in," whispered Desmond in the serang's ear, emphasizing the order by laying the cold blade of a knife against his collar-bone. Fuzl Khan had not yet finished trussing the other; as the last man entered Desmond threw himself upon him. He could not prevent a low startled cry; and struggling together, the two rolled upon the floor. The Maratha, not recognizing his assailant, apparently thought that the serang had suddenly gone mad, for he merely tried to disengage himself, speaking in a tone half angry, half soothing. But finding that the man grasping him had a determined purpose, he became furious with alarm, and plucking a knife from his girdle struck viciously at the form above him. Desmond, with his back to the light, saw the blow coming. He caught the man's wrist, and in another moment the Gujarati came to his assistance. Thus the last of the watchmen was secured and laid beside his comrades.

Six of the men on board the gallivats had been disposed of. But there still remained five, asleep until their turn for watching and dicing came. So quietly had the capture of the six been effected that not one of the sleepers had been disturbed. To deal with them was an easier matter. Leaving the bound men in the cabin, and led by the serang, whose feet had been released, Desmond and

Fuzl Khan visited each of the gallivats in turn. The sleeping men awoke at their approach, but they were reassured by the voice of the serang, who in terror for his life spoke to them at Desmond's bidding; and before they realized what was happening they were in the toils, helpless like the rest.

When the last of the watchmen was thus secured, Desmond crept to the vessel nearest to the shore and, making a bell of his hands, sent a low hail across the surface of the water in the direction of the jetty. He waited anxiously, peering into the darkness, straining his ears. Five minutes passed, fraught with the pain of uncertainty and suspense. Then he caught the faint sound of ripples: he fancied he descried a dark form on the water; it drew nearer, became more definite.

"Is that you, sahib?" said a low voice.

"Yes."

He gave a great sigh of relief. The toni drew alongside, and soon five men, with bundles, muskets, and the small heavy barrel, stood with Desmond and the Gujarati on the deck of the gallivat.

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

In which seven bold men light a big bonfire; and the Pirate finds our hero a bad bargain.

Desmond's strongest feeling, as his companions stepped on board, was wonder--wonder at the silence of the fort, the darkness that covered the whole face of the country, the safety of himself and the men so lately prisoners. What time had passed since they had left the shed he was unable to guess; the moments had been so crowded that any reckoning was impossible. But when, as he waited for the coming of the boat, his mind ran over the incidents of the flight--the trussing of the sentry, the wary approach to the bastion, the tragic fate of the sentinel there, the stealthy creeping along the shore, the swim to the gallivats and all that had happened since: as he recalled these things, he could not but wonder that the alarm he dreaded had not already been given. But it was clear that all was as yet undiscovered; and the plot had worked out so exactly as planned that he hoped still for a breathing-space to carry out his enterprise to the end.

There was not a moment to be wasted. The instant the men were aboard

Desmond rapidly gave his orders. Fuzl Khan and one of the Mysoreans he sent to carry the barrel to Angria's gallivat. It contained da'ma. They were to break it open, tear down the hangings in the cabin, smear them plentifully, and set light to them from the lantern. Meanwhile Desmond himself, with the rest of the men, set about preparing the gallivat in which he was about to make his next move.

The lightest of the line of vessels was the one in which the watchmen had been gambling. It happened that this, with the gallivat next to it, had come into harbour late in the evening from a short scouting cruise, and the sweeps used by their crews had not been carried on shore, as the custom was. The larger vessel had fifty of these sweeps, the smaller thirty. If pursuit was to be checked it was essential that none of them should be left in the enemy's hands, and the work of carrying the fifty from the larger to the smaller vessel took some time. There was no longer the same need for quietness of movement. So long as any great noise and bustle was avoided, the sentinels on the walls of the fort would only suppose, if sounds reached their ears, that the watch on board were securing the gallivats at their moorings.

When the sweeps had all been transferred Desmond ordered the prisoners to be brought from Angria's cabin to the smaller vessel. The lashings of their feet were cut in turn; each man was carefully searched, deprived of all weapons, and escorted from the one vessel to the other, his feet being then securely bound as before.

On board the smallest gallivat were now Desmond, five of his companions, and eleven helpless Marathas. He had just directed one of the Biluchis to cast loose the lashings between the vessels, and was already congratulating himself that the main difficulties of his venture were past, when he suddenly heard shouts from the direction of the fort. Immediately afterwards the deep notes of the huge gong kept in Angria's courtyard boomed and reverberated across the harbour, echoed at brief intervals by the strident clanging of several smaller gongs in the town. Barely had the first sound reached his ears when he saw a light flash forth from the outermost bastion; to the left of it appeared a second; and soon, along the whole face of the fort, in the dockyard, in the town, innumerable lights dotted the blackness, some stationary, others moving this way and that. Now cries were heard from all sides, growing in volume until the sound was as of some gigantic hornets' nest awakened into angry activity. To the clangour of gongs was added the blare of trumpets, and from the walls of the fort and palace, from the hill beyond, from every cliff along the shore, echoed and re-echoed an immense and furious din.

For a few seconds Desmond stood as if fascinated, watching the transformation which the hundreds of twinkling lights had caused. Then he pulled himself together, and, with a word to the Biluchi who had loosed the lashings, bidding

him hold on to the next gallivat, he sprang to the side of this vessel, and hurried towards Angria's. Fuzl Khan had not returned; Desmond almost feared that some mishap had befallen the man. Reaching the centre vessel, he peered down the hatchway, but started back as a gust of acrid smoke struck him from below. He called to the Gujarati. There was no response. For an instant he stood in hesitation; had the man been overcome by the suffocating fumes filling the hold? But just as, with the instinct of rescue, he was about to lower himself into the depths, he heard a low hail from the vessel at the end of the line nearest the shore. A moment afterwards Fuzl Khan came stumbling towards him.

"I have fired another gallivat, sahib," he said, his voice ringing with fierce exultation.

"Well done, Fuzl Khan," said Desmond. "Now we must be off. See, there are torches coming down towards the jetty."

The two sprang across the intervening vessels, a dense cloud of smoke following them from the hatchway of Angria's gallivat. Reaching the outermost of the line, Desmond gave the word, the anchor was slipped, the two Biluchis pressed with all their force against the adjacent vessel, and the gallivat moved slowly out. Desmond ran to the helm, and the Gujarati with his five companions seizing each upon one of the long sweeps, they dropped their blades into the water and began to pull.

Desmond was all a-tingle with excitement and determination. The shouts from the shore were nearer; the lights were brighter; for all he knew the whole garrison and population were gathering. They had guessed that an escape was being attempted by sea. Even now perhaps boats were setting off, bringing rowers to man the gallivats, and oars to send them in pursuit. If they should reach the vessels before the middle one had burst into flame, he felt that his chances of getting away were small indeed. When would the flame appear? It might check the pursuers, throw them into consternation, confuse and delay the pursuit. Would the longed-for blaze never show itself? And how slowly his gallivat was moving! The rowers were bending to their work with a will, but six men were but a poor crew for so large a vessel, and the progress it was making was in fact due more to the still ebbing tide than to the frantic efforts of the oarsmen. The wind was contrary; it would be useless to hoist the sail. At this rate they would be half an hour or more in reaching the three grabs anchored nearer the mouth of the harbour. The willing rowers on their benches could not know how slowly the vessel was moving, but it was painfully clear to Desmond at the helm; relative to the lights on shore the gallivat seemed scarcely to move at all.

He called to Fuzl Khan, who left his oar and hurried aft.

"We must make more speed, Fuzl Khan. Release the prisoners' hands; keep their feet tied, and place them among our party. Don't take an oar yourself: stand

over them ready to strike down any man who mutinies."

The Gujarati grunted and hurried away. Assisted by Surendra Nath, who, being his companion on the rowing bench, had perforce dropped his oar, he soon had the prisoners in position. Urging them with terrible threats and fierce imprecations, he forced them to ply their oars with long steady strokes. The way on the gallivat increased. There was not a great distance now to be covered, it was unnecessary to husband their strength, and with still more furious menaces Fuzl Khan got out of the sturdy Marathas all the energy of which they were capable. The escaped prisoners needed no spur; they were working with might and main, for dear life.

Desmond had to steer by guesswork and such landmarks as were afforded by the lights on shore. He peered anxiously ahead, hoping to see the dim shapes of the three grabs; but this was at present impossible, since they lay between him and the seaward extremity of the fort, where lights had not yet appeared. Looking back he saw a number of torches flitting along the shore; and now two or three dark objects, no doubt boats, were moving from the further side of the jetty towards the gallivats. At the same moment that he caught sight of these he saw at last, rising from the gallivats, the thin tongue of flame hi had so long expected. But now that it had come at last, showing that the work on board had been thorough, he almost regretted it, for it was instantly seen from the shore and greeted by a babel of yells caught up in different parts of the town and fort. As at a signal the torches no longer flickered hither and thither aimlessly, but all took the same direction towards the jetty. The hunt was up!

Glancing round, Desmond suddenly gave the order to cease rowing, and putting the helm hard down just avoided crashing into a dark object ahead. The sweeps grated against the side of what proved to be one of the grabs for which he had been looking. A voice from its deck hailed him.

"Take care! Where are you going? Who are you?"

Desmond called up the serang. He dare not reply himself, lest his accent should betray him.

"Tell him all is well. We have a message from the fort to the *Tremukji*," he said in a whisper.

The serang repeated the words aloud.

"Well, huzur. But what is the meaning of the noise and the torches and the blaze on the sea?"

"Tell him we have no time to waste. Ask him where the *Tremukji* lies."

The man on the grab replied that she lay outside, a dozen boat's-lengths. Desmond knew that this vessel, which had been launched during his captivity, and in whose construction he had had a humble part, had proved the swiftest in the fleet, although much smaller than the majority of the Pirate's. Once on board

her, and beyond reach of the guns of the fort, he might fairly hope to get clear away in spite of his miscellaneous crew. Giving to the Gujarati the order to go ahead, he questioned the serang.

"What is the name of the serang in charge of the *Tremukji*?"

"Pandu, sahib."

"How many men are on board her?"

"Three, sahib."

"Then, when we come alongside and I give the word, you will tell him to come aboard at once; we have a message from the fort for him."

Owing to the trend of the shore, the gallivat had been slowly nearing the walls of the fort, and at this moment could not be more than a hundred and fifty yards distant from them. But for the shouting on shore the noise of the sweeps must by this time have been heard. In the glow of the blazing vessels in mid channel the moving gallivat had almost certainly been seen. Desmond grew more and more anxious.

"Hail the grab," he said to the serang as the vessel loomed up ahead.

"Eo, eo, *Tremukji*!" cried the man.

There came an answering hail. Then the serang hesitated; he was evidently wondering whether even now he might not defy this foreigner who was bearding his terrible master. But his hesitation was short. At a sign from Desmond, Gulam the Biluchi, who had brought the serang forward, applied the point of his knife to the back of the unfortunate man's neck.

"I have a message from Angria Rao," he cried quickly. "Come aboard at once."

The rowers at a word from Fuzl Khan shipped their oars, and the two vessels came together with a sharp thud. The serang in charge of the grab vaulted across the bulwarks and fell into the waiting arms of Fuzl Khan, who squeezed his throat, muttered a few fierce words in his ear, and handed him over to Gulam, who bundled him below. Then, shouting the order to make fast, the Gujarati flung a hawser across to the grab. The two men on board her obeyed without question; but they were still at the work when Desmond and Fuzl Khan, followed by the two Mysoreans, leapt upon them from the deck of the gallivat. There was a short sharp scrimmage; then these guardians of the grab were hauled on to the gallivat and sent to join the rowers on the main deck.

Desmond and his six companions now had fourteen prisoners on their hands, and in ordinary circumstances the disproportion would have been fatal. But the captives, besides having been deprived of all means of offence, had no exact knowledge of the number of men who had trapped them. Their fears and the darkness had a magnifying effect, and, like Falstaff, they would have sworn that their enemies were ten times as many as they actually were.

So deeply engrossed had Desmond been in the capture of the grab that he

had forgotten the one serious danger that threatened to turn the tide of accident, hitherto so favourable, completely against him. He had forgotten the burning gallivats. But now his attention was recalled to them in a very unpleasant and forcible way. There was a deafening report, as it seemed from a few yards' distance, followed immediately by a splash in the water just ahead. The glare of the burning vessels was dimly lighting up almost the whole harbour mouth, and the runaway gallivat, now clearly seen from the fort, had become a target for its guns. The gunners had been specially exercised of late in anticipation of an attack from Bombay, and Desmond knew that in his slow-going vessel he could not hope to draw out of range in time to escape a battering.

But his gallivat was among the grabs. At this moment it must be impossible for the gunners to distinguish between the runaway and the loyal vessels. If he could only cause them to hold their fire for a time! Knowing that the Gujarati had a stentorian voice, and that a shout would carry upwards from the water to the parapet, in a flash Desmond saw the possibility of a ruse. He spoke to Fuzl Khan. The man at once turned to the fort, and with the full force of his lungs shouted:

"Comrades, do not fire. We have caught them!"

Answering shouts came from the walls; the words were indistinguishable, but the trick had succeeded, at any rate for the moment. No second shot was at this time fired.

Desmond made full use of this period of grace. He recognized that the gallivat, while short-handed, was too slow to make good the escape; the grab, with the wind contrary, could never be got out of the harbour; the only course open to him was to make use of the one to tow the other until they reached the open sea. As soon as a hawser could be bent the grab was taken in tow: its crew was impressed with the other prisoners as rowers, under the charge of the Biluchis; and with Desmond at the helm of the grab and the Gujarati steering the gallivat, the two vessels crept slowly seawards. They went at a snail's pace, for it was nearly slack tide; and slow as the progress of the gallivat had been before it was much slower now that the men had to move two vessels instead of one. To Desmond, turning every now and again to watch the increasing glare from the burning gallivats, it seemed that he scarcely advanced at all. The town and the townward part of the fort were minute by minute becoming more brightly illuminated; every detail around the blazing vessels could be distinctly seen; and mingled with the myriad noises from the shore was now the crackle of the flames, and the hiss of burning spars and rigging as they fell into the water.

The gallivats had separated into two groups; either they had been cut apart, or, more probably, the lashings had been burnt through. Around one of the groups Desmond saw a number of small boats. They appeared to be trying to cut out the middle of the three gallivats, which seemed to be as yet uninjured, while the

vessels on either side were in full blaze. Owing to the intense heat the men's task was a difficult and dangerous one, and Desmond had good hope that they would not succeed until the gallivat was too much damaged to be of use for pursuit. He wondered, indeed, at the attempt being made at all; for it kept all the available boats engaged when they might have dashed upon the grab in tow and made short work of it. The true explanation of their blunder did not at the moment occur to Desmond. The fact was that the men trying so earnestly to save the gallivat knew nothing of what had happened to the grab. They were aware that a gallivat had been cut loose and was standing out to sea; but the glare of the fire blinded them to all that was happening beyond a narrow circle, and as yet they had had no information from shore of what was actually occurring. When they did learn that two vessels were on their way to the sea, they would no doubt set out to recapture the fugitives instead of wasting their efforts in a futile attempt to save the unsavable.

Desmond was still speculating on the point when another shot from the fort aroused him to the imminent danger. The dark shapes of the two vessels must now certainly be visible from the walls. The shot flew wide. Although the grab was well within range it was doubtless difficult to take aim, the distance being deceptive and the sights useless in the dark. But this shot was followed at intervals of a few seconds by another and another; it was clear that the fugitives were running the gauntlet of the whole armament on this side of the fort. The guns were being fired as fast as they could be loaded; the gunners were becoming accustomed to the darkness, and when Desmond heard the shots plumping into the water, nearer to him, it seemed, every time, he could not but recognize that success or failure hung upon a hair.

Crash! A round shot struck the grab within a few feet of the wheel. A shower of splinters flew in all directions. Desmond felt a stinging blow on the forehead; he put up his hand; when he took it away it was wet. He could not leave the wheel to see what damage had been done to the ship, still less to examine his own injury. He was alone on board. Every other man was straining at his oar in the gallivat. He felt the blood trickling down his face; from time to time he wiped it away with the loose end of his dhoti. Then he forgot his wound, for two more shots within a few seconds of each other struck the grab forward. Clearly the gunners were aiming at his vessel, which, being larger than the gallivat, and higher in the water, presented an easier mark. Where had she been hit? If below the waterline, before many minutes were past she would be sinking under him. Yet he could do nothing. He dared not order the men in the gallivat to cease rowing; he dared not leave the helm of the grab; he could but wait and hold his post. It would not be long before he knew whether the vessel had been seriously hit: if it was so, then would be the time to cast off the tow-rope.

The gallivat, at any rate, appeared not to have suffered. Desmond was beginning to think he was out of the wood when he heard a crash in front, followed by a still more ominous sound. The motion of the gallivat at once ceased, and, the grab slowly creeping up to her, Desmond had to put his helm hard up to avoid a collision. He could hear the Gujarati raging and storming on deck, and cries as of men in pain; then, as the grab came abreast of the smaller vessel, he became aware of what had happened. The mainmast of the gallivat had been struck by a shot and had gone by the board.

Desmond hailed the Gujarati and told him to get three or four men to cut away the wreckage.

"Keep an eye on the prisoners," he added, feeling that this was perhaps the most serious element in a serious situation; for with round shot flying about the vessel it might well have seemed to the unhappy men on the rowing benches that mutiny was the lesser of two risks. But the rowers were cowed by the presence of the two Biluchis armed with their terrible knives, and they crowded in dumb helplessness while the tangled rigging was cut away.

"Is any one hurt?" asked Desmond.

"One of the rowers has a broken arm, sahib," replied Shaik Abdullah.

"And I have a contusion of the nose," said the Babu lugubriously.

It was impossible to do anything for the sufferers at the moment. It was still touch-and-go with the whole party. The shots from the fort were now beginning to fall short, but, for all Desmond knew, boats might have been launched in pursuit, and if he was overtaken it meant lingering torture and a fearful death. He was in a fever of impatience until at length, the tangled shrouds having been cut away, the rowing was resumed and the two vessels began again to creep slowly seaward.

Gradually they drew out of range of the guns. Steering straight out to sea, Desmond had a clear view of the whole of the harbour and a long stretch of the river. The scene was brightly lit up, and he saw that two of the gallivats had been towed away from the burning vessels, from which the flames were now shooting high into the air. But even on the two that had been cut loose there were spurts of flame; and Desmond hoped that they had sustained enough damage to make them unseaworthy.

Suddenly there were two loud explosions, in quick succession. A column of fire rose towards the sky from each of the gallivats that were blazing most brightly. The fire had at length reached the ammunition. The red sparks sprang upwards like a fountain, casting a ruddy glow for many yards around; then they fell back into the sea, and all was darkness, except for the lesser lights from the burning vessels whose magazines had as yet escaped. The explosions could hardly have occurred at a more opportune moment, for the darkness was now all the more

intense, and favoured the fugitives.

There was a brisk breeze from the south-west outside the harbour, and when the two vessels lost the shelter of the headland they crept along even more slowly than before. Desmond had learnt enough of seamanship on board the *Good Intent* to know that he must have sea-room before he cast off the gallivat and made sail northwards; otherwise he would inevitably be driven on shore. It was this fact that had prompted his operations in the harbour. He knew that the grabs could not put to sea unless they were towed, and the gallivats being rendered useless, towing was impossible.

The sea was choppy, and the rowers had much ado to control the sweeps. Only their dread of the Biluchis' knives kept them at their work. But the progress, though slow, was steady; gradually the glow in the sky behind the headland grew dimmer; though it was as yet impossible to judge with certainty how much offing had been made, Desmond, resolving to give away no chances, and being unacquainted with the trend of the coast, kept the rowers at work, with short intervals of rest, until dawn. By this means he hoped to avoid all risk of being driven on a lee shore, and to throw Angria off the scent; for it would naturally be supposed that the fugitives would head at once for Bombay, and pursuit, if attempted, would be made in that direction.

When day broke over the hills, Desmond guessed that the coast must be now five miles off. As far as he could see, it ran north by east. He had now plenty of sea-room; there was no pursuer in sight; the wind was in his favour, and if it held, no vessel in Angria's harbour could now catch him. He called to the Gujarati, who shouted an order to the Biluchis; the worn-out men on the benches ceased rowing, except four, who pulled a few strokes every now and again to prevent the two vessels from colliding. Desmond had thought at first of stopping the rowing altogether and running the grab alongside the gallivat; but that course, while safe enough in the still water of the harbour, would have its dangers in the open sea. So, lashing the helm of the grab, he dropped into a small boat which had been bumping throughout the night against the vessel's side, and in a few minutes was on board the gallivat.

He first inquired after the men who had been wounded in the night. One had a broken arm, which no one on board knew how to set. The Babu had certainly a much discoloured nose, the contusion having been caused no doubt by a splinter of wood thrown up by the shot. Two or three of the rowers had slight bruises and abrasions, but none had been killed and none dangerously hurt.

Then Desmond had a short and earnest talk with the Gujarati, who alone of the men had sufficient seamanship to make him of any value in deciding upon the next move.

"What is to be done with the gallivat?" asked Desmond.

"Scuttle her, sahib, and hoist sail on the grab."

"But the rowers?"

"Fasten them to the benches and let them drown. They could not help our enemies then, and it would make up for what you and I and all of us have suffered in Gheria."

"No, I can't do that," said Desmond.

"It must be as I say, sahib. There is nothing else to do. We have killed no one yet, except the sentinel on the parapet; I did that neatly, the sahib will agree; I would have a life for every lash of the whip upon my back."

"No," said Desmond decisively, "I will not drown the men. We will take on board the grab three or four, who must be sailors; let us ask who will volunteer. We will promise them good pay; we haven't any money, to be sure, but the grab can be sold when we reach Bombay, and though we stole her I think everybody would admit that she is our lawful prize. I should think they'll be ready enough to volunteer, for they won't care to return to Gheria and face Angria's rage. At the same time we can't take more than three or four, because in the daylight they can now see how few we are, and they might take a fancy to recapture the grab. What do you think of that plan?"

The Gujarati sullenly assented. He did not understand mercy to an enemy.

"There is no need to pay them, sahib," he said. "You can promise pay; a promise is enough."

Desmond was unwilling to start an argument and said nothing. Once in Bombay he could ensure that any pledges given would be strictly kept.

As he expected, there was no difficulty in obtaining volunteers. Twice the number required offered their services. They had not found their work with the Pirate so easy and so well rewarded as to have any great objection to a change of masters. Moreover, they no doubt feared the reception they would get from Angria if they returned. And it appeared afterwards that during the night the Biluchis had recounted many fabulous incidents all tending to show that the sahib was a very important as well as a very ingenious Firangi, so that this reputation, coupled with an offer of good pay, overcame any scruples the men might retain.

Among those who volunteered and whose services were accepted was the serang of Angria's gallivat. Unknown to Desmond, while he was holding this conversation with the Gujarati, the serang, crouching in apparent apathy on his bench, had really strained his ears to catch what was being said. He, with the three other men selected, was released from his bonds, and ordered to lower the long boat of the gallivat and stow in it all the ammunition for the guns that was to be found in the ship's magazine. This was then taken on board the grab, and Desmond ordered one of the Mysoreans to load the grab's stern chaser, telling the Marathas whom he intended to leave on the gallivat that, at the first sign of any

attempt to pursue, their vessel would be sunk.

Then in two parties the fugitives went on board the grab. Desmond was the last to leave the gallivat, releasing one of the captive rowers, who in his turn could release the rest.

As soon as Desmond stepped on board the grab, the hawser connecting the two vessels was cast off, the mainsail was run up, and the grab, sailing large, stood up the coast. Fuzl Khan, swarming up to the mast-head, reported two or three sail far behind, apparently at the mouth of Gheria harbour. But Desmond, knowing that if they were in pursuit they had a long beat to windward before them, felt no anxiety on that score. Besides, the grab he was on had been selected precisely because it was the fastest vessel in Angria's fleet.

Having got fairly under way, he felt that he had leisure to inspect the damage done to the grab by the shots from the fort which had given him so much concern in the darkness. That she had suffered no serious injury was clear from the ease with which she answered the helm and the rapidity of her sailing. He found that a hole or two had been made in the forepart of the deck, and a couple of yards of the bulwarks carried away. There was nothing to cause alarm or to demand instant repair.

It was a bright cool morning, and Desmond, after the excitements and the strain of the last few days, felt an extraordinary lightness of spirit as the vessel cut through the water. For the first time in his life he knew the meaning of the word freedom; none but a man who has suffered captivity or duress can know such joy as now filled his soul. The long stress of his menial life on board the *Good Intent*, the weary months of toil, difficulty and danger as Angria's prisoner, were past; and it was with whole-hearted joyousness he realized that he was now on his way to Bombay, whence he might proceed to Madras, and Clive--Clive, the hero who was as a fixed star in his mental firmament.

The gallivat, lying all but motionless on the water, a forlorn object with the jagged stump of her mainmast, grew smaller and smaller in the distance, and was soon hull down. Desmond, turning away from a last look in her direction, awoke from his reverie to the consciousness that he was ravenously hungry.

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

In which our hero weathers a storm; and prepares for squalls.

Hungry as he was, however, Desmond would not eat while he was, so to speak, still in touch with Gheria. He ran up the sail on the mizzen, and the grab was soon cutting her way through the water at a spanking rate. He had closely studied the chart on board the *Good Intent* when that vessel was approaching the Indian coast--not with any fixed purpose, but in the curiosity which invested all things Indian with interest for him. From his recollection he believed that Gheria was somewhat more than a hundred miles from Bombay. If the grab continued to make such good sailing, she might hope to cover this distance by midnight. But she could hardly run into harbour until the following day. There was of course no chart, not even a compass, on board; the only apparatus he possessed was a water-clock; naturally he could not venture far out to sea, but neither dared he hug the shore too closely. He knew not what reefs there might be lying in wait for his untaught keel. Besides, he might be sighted from one or other of the coast strongholds still remaining in Angria's hands, and it was not impossible that swift messengers had already been sent along the shore from Gheria, prescribing a keen look-out and the chase of any solitary grab making northward. But if he kept too far out he might run past Bombay, though when he mentioned this to his fellow-fugitives he was assured by the Biluchis and Fuzl Khan that they would unfailingly recognize the landmarks, having more than once in the course of their trading and pirate voyages touched at that port.

On the whole he thought it best to keep the largest possible offing that would still leave the coast within sight. Putting the helm down he ran out some eight or ten miles, until the coast was visible only from the mast-head as a purple line on the horizon, with occasional glimpses of high ghats[#] behind.

[#] Mountains.

Meanwhile the Gujarati and some of the others had breakfasted from their bundles. Leaving the former in charge of the wheel, Desmond took his well-earned meal of rice and chapatis, stale, but sweet with the sweetness of freedom.

In his ignorance of the coast he felt that he must not venture to run into Bombay in the darkness, and resolved to heave-to during the night. At the dawn he could creep in towards the shore without anxiety, for there was little chance of falling in with hostile vessels in the immediate neighbourhood of Bombay. Knowing that a considerable British fleet lay there, the Pirate would not allow his vessels to cruise far from his own strongholds. But as there was a prospect of spending at least one night at sea, it was necessary to establish some system of watches. The task of steering had to be shared between Desmond and Fuzl Khan; and the

majority of the men being wholly inexperienced, it was not safe to leave fewer than six of them on duty at a time. The only danger likely to arise was from the weather. So far it was good; the sea was calm, the sky was clear; but Desmond was enough of a seaman to know that, being near the coast, the grab might at any moment, almost without warning, be struck by a squall. He had to consider how best to divide up his crew.

Including himself there were eleven men on board. Four of them were strangers of whom he knew nothing; the six who had escaped with him were known only as fellow-prisoners.

To minimize any risk, he divided the crew into three watches. One consisted of the Babu, the serang, and one of the Marathas from the gallivat. Each of the others comprised a Mysorean, a Biluchi, and a Maratha. Thus the strangers were separated as much as possible, and the number of Marathas on duty was never in excess of the number of fugitives; the steersman, Desmond or the Gujarati as the case might be, turned the balance.

The watch was set by means of the water-clock found in the cabin. Desmond arranged that he and Fuzl Khan should take alternate periods of eight hours on and four off. The two matchlocks taken from the sentinels of the fort and brought on board were loaded and placed on deck near the wheel. None of the crew were armed save the Biluchis, who retained their knives.

Towards midday the wind dropped almost to a dead calm. This was disappointing, for Desmond suspected that he was still within the area of Angria's piratical operations--if not from Gheria, at any rate from some of the more northerly strongholds not yet captured by the East India Company or the Peshwa. But he had a good offing: scanning the horizon all around he failed to sight a single sail; and he hoped that the breeze would freshen as suddenly as it had dropped.

Now that excitement and suspense were over, and there was nothing that called for activity, Desmond felt the natural reaction from the strain he had undergone. By midday he was so tired and sleepy that he found himself beginning to doze at the wheel. The Gujarati had been sleeping for some hours, and as the vessel now required scarcely any attention, Desmond thought it a good opportunity for snatching a rest. Calling to Fuzl Khan to take his place, and bidding him keep the vessel's head, as far as he could, due north, he went below. About six bells, as time would have been reckoned on the *Good Intent*, he was wakened by the Babu, with a message from the Gujarati desiring him to come on deck.

"Is anything wrong, Babu?" he asked, springing up.

"Not so far as I am aware, sahib. Only it is much hotter since I began my watch."

Desmond had hardly stepped on deck before he understood the reason of the summons. Overhead all was clear; but towards the land a dense bank of black

cloud was rising, and approaching the vessel with great rapidity. It was as though some vast blanket were being thrown seawards. The air was oppressively hot, and the sea lay like lead. Desmond knew the signs; the Gujarati knew them too; and they set to work with a will to meet the storm.

Fortunately Desmond, recognizing the unhandiness of his crew, had taken care to set no more sail than could be shortened at the briefest notice. He had not been called a moment too soon. A flash lit the black sky; a peal of thunder rattled like artillery far off; and then a squall struck the grab with terrific force, and the sea, suddenly lashed into fury, advanced like a cluster of green liquid mountains to overwhelm the vessel. She heeled bulwarks under, and was instantly wrapped in a dense mist, rain pouring in blinding sheets. The maintopsail was blown away with a report like a gun-shot; and then, under a reefed foresail, the grab ran before the wind, which was apparently blowing from the south-east. Furious seas broke over the deck; the wind shrieked through the rigging; the vessel staggered and plunged under the shocks of sea and wind. Fuzl Khan clung to the helm with all his strength, but his arms were almost torn from their sockets, and he called aloud for Desmond to come to his assistance.

It was fortunate that little was required of the crew, for in a few minutes all of them save the four Marathas from the gallivat were prostrated with sea-sickness. The Babu had run below, and occasionally, between two gusts, Desmond could hear the shrieks and groans of the terrified man. But he had no time to sympathize; his whole energies were bent on preventing the grab from being pooped. He felt no alarm; indeed, the storm exhilarated him; danger is bracing to a courageous spirit, and his blood leapt to this contest with the elements. He thrilled with a sense of personal triumph as he realized that the grab was a magnificent sea-boat. There was no fear but that the hull would stand the strain; Desmond knew the pains that had been expended in her building: the careful selection of the timbers, the niceness with which the planks had been fitted. No European vessel could have proved her superior in seaworthiness.

But she was fast drifting out into the Indian Ocean, far away from the haven Desmond desired to make. How long was this going to last? Whither was he being carried? Without chart or compass he could take no bearings, set no true course. It was a dismal prospect, and Desmond, glowing as he was with the excitement of the fight, yet felt some anxiety. Luckily, besides the provisions brought in their bundles by the fugitives, there was a fair supply of food and water on board; for although every portable article of value had been taken on shore when the grab anchored in Gheria, it had not been thought necessary to remove the bulkier articles. Thus, if at the worst the vessel were driven far out to sea, there was no danger of starvation even if she could not make port for several days.

But Desmond hoped that things would not come to this pass. Towards

nightfall, surely, the squall would blow itself out. Yet the wind appeared to be gaining rather than losing strength; hour after hour passed, and he still could not venture to quit the wheel. He was drenched through and through with the rain; his muscles ached with the stress; and he could barely manage to eat the food and water brought him staggeringly by the serang in the intervals of the wilder gusts.

The storm had lasted for nearly ten hours before it showed signs of abatement. Another two hours passed before it was safe to leave the helm. The wind had by this time fallen to a steady breeze; the rain had ceased; the sky was clear and starlit; but the sea was still running high. At length the serang offered to steer while the others got a little rest; and entrusting the wheel to him, Desmond and Fuzl Khan threw themselves down as they were, on the deck near the wheel, and were soon fast asleep.

At dawn Desmond awoke to find the grab labouring in a heavy sea, with just steering-way on. The wind had dropped to a light breeze. The Gujarati was soon up and relieved the serang at the wheel; the rest of the crew, haggard, melancholy objects, were set to work to make things ship-shape. Only the Babu remained below; he lay huddled in the cabin, bruised, prostrate, unable to realize that the bitterness of death was past, unable to believe that life had any further interest for him.

Desmond's position was perplexing. Where was he? Perforce he had lost his bearings. He scanned the whole circumference of the horizon, and saw nothing but the vast dark ocean plain and its immense blue dome--never a yard of land, never a stitch of canvas. He had no means of ascertaining his latitude. During the twelve hours of the storm the grab had been driven at a furious rate; if the wind had blown all the time from the south-east, the quarter from which it had struck the vessel, she must now be at least fifty miles from the coast, possibly more, and north of Bombay. In the inky blackness of the night, amid the blinding rain, it had been impossible to read anything from the stars. All was uncertain, save the golden sheen of sunlight in the east.

Desmond's only course was to put the vessel about and steer by the sun. She must thus come sooner or later in sight of the coast, and then one or other of the men on board might recognize a landmark--a hill, a promontory, a town. The danger was that they might make the coast in the neighbourhood of one of the Pirate's strongholds; but that must be risked.

For the rest of the day there were light variable winds, such as, according to Fuzl Khan, might be expected at that season of the year. The north-east monsoon was already overdue. Its coming was usually heralded by fitful and uncertain winds, varied by such squalls or storms as they had just experienced.

The sea moderated early in the morning, and became continually smoother until, as the sun went down, there was scarce a ripple on the surface. The wind

meanwhile had gradually veered to the south-west, and later to the west, and the grab began to make more headway. But with the fall of night it dropped to a dead calm, a circumstance from which the Gujarati inferred that they were still a long way from the coast. When the stars appeared, however, and Desmond was able to get a better idea of the course to set, a slight breeze sprang up again from the west, and the grab crept along at a speed of perhaps four knots.

It had been a lazy day on board. The crew had recovered from their sickness, but there was nothing for them to do, and as Orientals they were quite content to do nothing. Only the Babu remained off duty, in addition to the watch below. Desmond visited him, and persuaded him to take some food: but nothing would induce him to come on deck; the mere sight of the sea, he said, would externalize his interior.

It was Desmond's trick at the wheel between eight and midnight. Gulam Mahomed was on the look-out; the rest of the crew were forward squatting on the deck in a circle round Fuzl Khan. Desmond, thinking of other things, heard dully, as from a great distance, the drone of the Gujarati's voice. He was talking more freely and continuously than was usual with him; ordinarily his manner was morose; he was a man of few words, and those not too carefully chosen. So prolonged was the monotonous murmur, however, that Desmond by and by found himself wondering what was the subject of his lengthy discourse; he even strained his ears to catch, if it might be, some fragments of it; but nothing came into distinctness out of the low-pitched drone. Occasionally it was broken by the voice of one of the others; now and again there was a brief interval of silence; then the Gujarati began again. Desmond's thoughts were once more diverted to his own strange fate. Little more than a year before, he had been a boy, with no more experience than was to be gained within the narrow circuit of a country farm. What a gamut of adventure he had run through since then! He smiled as he thought that none of the folks at Market Drayton would recognize, in the muscular, strapping, sun-tanned seaman, the slim boy of Wilcote Grange. His imagination had woven many a chain of incident, and set him in many a strange place; but never had it presented a picture of himself in command of as mixed a crew as was ever thrown together, navigating unknown waters without chart or compass, a fugitive from the chains of an Eastern despot. His quick fancy was busy even now. He felt that it was not for nothing he had been brought into his present plight; and at the back of his mind was the belief, founded on his strong wish and hope, that the magnetism of Clive's personality, which he had felt so strongly at Market Drayton, was still influencing his career.

At midnight Fuzl Khan relieved him at the wheel, and he turned in. His sleep was troubled. It was a warm night--unusually warm for the time of year. There were swarms of cockroaches and rats on board; the cockroaches huge beasts, three

times the size of those that overran the kitchen at home; the rats seeming as large as the rabbits he had been wont to shoot on the farm. They scurried about with their little restless noises, which usually would have had no power to break his sleep; but now they worried him. He scared them into silence for a moment by striking upon the floor; but the rustle and clipper-clapper immediately began again.

After vain efforts to regain his sleep, he at length rose and went on deck. He did not move with intentional quietness, but he was barefoot, and his steps made no sound. It was a black night, a warm haze almost shutting out the stars. As he reached the deck he heard low murmurs from a point somewhere aft. He had no idea what the time was: Shaik Abdullah had the water-clock, with which he timed the watches; and Desmond's could not yet be due. Avoiding the spot where the conversation was in progress, he leant over the bulwarks, and gazed idly at the phosphorescent glow upon the water. Then he suddenly became aware that the sounds of talking came from near the wheel, and Fuzl Khan was among the talkers. What made the man so uncommonly talkative? Seemingly he was taking up the thread where it had been dropped earlier in the night; what was it about?

Desmond asked himself the question without much interest, and was again allowing his thoughts to rove when he caught the word "sahib," and then the word "Firangi" somewhat loudly spoken. Immediately afterwards there was a low hiss from the Gujarati, as of one warning another to speak lower. The experiences of the past year had quickened Desmond's wits; with reason he had become more suspicious than of yore, and the necessity to be constantly on his guard had made him alert, alive to the least suggestion. Why had the speaker been hushed--and by Fuzl Khan? He remembered the ugly rumours, the veiled hints he had heard about the man in Gheria. If they were true, he had sold his comrades who trusted him. They might not be true; the man himself had always indignantly denied them. Desmond had nothing against him. So far he had acted loyally enough; but then he had nothing to gain by playing his fellow-fugitives false, and it was with this knowledge that Desmond had decided to make him privy to the escape. But now they were clear of Gheria. Fuzl Khan was free like the rest; he had no longer the same inducement to play straight if his interest seemed to him to clash with the general. Yet it was not easy to see how such a clashing could occur. Like the others he was lost at sea; until land was reached, at any rate, he could have no motive for opposition or mutiny.

While these thoughts were passing through Desmond's mind he heard a man rise from the group aft and come forward. Instinctively he moved from the side of the vessel towards the mainmast, and as the man drew near Desmond stood so that the stout tree-trunk was between them. The man went rapidly towards the bows, and in a low tone hailed the look-out, whispering him a summons to join

the Gujarati at the helm. The look-out, one of the Marathas, left his post; he came aft with the messenger, and, both passing on the same side of the vessel, Desmond by dodging round the mast escaped their notice.

At the best, the action of Fuzl Khan was a dereliction of duty; at the worst!--Desmond could not put his suspicions into words. It was clear that something was afoot, and he resolved to find out what it was. Very cautiously he followed the two men. Bending low, and keeping under the shadow of the bulwarks, he crept to within a few feet of the almost invisible group. A friendly coil of rope near the taffrail gave him additional cover; but the night was so dark that he ran little risk of being perceived so long as the men remained stationary. He himself could barely see the tall form of the Gujarati dimly outlined against the sky.

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH

In which a mutiny is quelled in a minute; and our Babu proves himself a man of war.

Crouching low, Desmond waited. When the Maratha joined the group Fuzl Khan addressed him directly in a low firm tone.

"We are all agreed, Nanna," he said. "You are the only man wanting to our purpose. This is the fastest grab on the coast. I know a port where we can get arms and ammunition; with a few good men (and I know where they can be found), we can make a strong band, and grow rich upon our spoils."

"But what about the sahib?"

"Wah! We know what these Firangi are like--at least the Angrezi.[#] They have the heads of pigs; there is no moving them. It would be vain to ask the young sahib to join us; his mind is set on getting to Bombay and telling all his troubles to the Company. What a folly! And what an injustice to us! It would destroy our chance of making our fortunes, for what would happen? The grab would be sold; the sahib would take the most of the price; we should get a small share, not enough to help us to become rovers of the sea and our own masters."

[#] English.

"The sahib will refuse, then. So be it! But what then shall we do with him?"

"He will not get the chance of refusing. He will not be told."

"But he is taking us to Bombay. How then can we work our will?"

"He thinks he is sailing to Bombay: he will really take us to Cutch."

"How is that, brother?"

"Does he know Bombay? Of a truth no. He is a boy: he has never sailed these seas. He depends on us. Suppose we come in sight of Bombay, who will tell him? Nobody. If he asks, we will say it is some other place: how can he tell? We will run past Bombay until we are within sight of Cutch: then truly I will do the rest."

The Maratha did not reply. The momentary silence was broken by Fuzl Khan again.

"See! Put the one thing in the balance against the other: how does it turn? On the one side the twenty rupees--a pitiful sum--promised by the sahib: and who knows he will keep his promise? On the other, a tenth share for each of you in the grab and whatsoever prey falls to it."

"Then the Babu is to have a share? Of a truth he is a small man, a hare in spirit; does he merit an equal share with us? We are elephants to him."

"No. He will have no share. He will go overboard."

"Why, then, what of the tenth share?"

"It will be mine. I shall be your leader and take two."

Desmond had heard enough. The Gujarati was showing himself in his true colours. His greed was roused, and the chance of setting up as a pirate on his own account, and making himself a copy of the man whose prisoner he had been, had prompted this pretty little scheme. Desmond crept noiselessly away and returned to his quarters. Not to sleep; he spent the remainder of his watch below in thinking out his position--in trying to devise some means of meeting this new and unexpected difficulty. He had not heard what Fuzl Khan proposed ultimately to do with him. He might share the Babu's fate: at the best it would appear that he had shaken off one captivity to fall into the toils of another. He had heard grim tales of the pirates of the Cambay Gulf; they were not likely to prove more pleasant masters than the Marathas farther south, even if they did not prefer to put him summarily out of the way. His presence among them might prove irksome, and what would the death of a single English youth matter? He was out of reach of all his friends; on the *Good Intent* none but Bulger and the New Englander had any real kindness for him, and if Bulger were to mention at any port that a young English lad was in captivity with the Pirate, what could be done? Should the projected expedition against Gheria prove successful, and he not be found among the European prisoners, it would be assumed that he was no longer living; and even if the news of his escape was known, it was absurd to suppose that all India would

be searched for him.

The outlook, from any point of view, was gloomy. The Gujarati had evidently won over the whole ship's company. Were they acting from the inclination for a rover's life, coupled with hope of gain, or had they been jockeyed into mutiny by Fuzl Khan? Desmond could not tell, nor could he find out without betraying a knowledge of the plot. Then he remembered the Babu. He alone had been excepted; the other men held him in contempt; but despite his weaknesses, for which he was indeed hardly accountable, Desmond had a real liking for him; and it was an unpleasant thought that, whatever happened to himself, if the plot succeeded Surendra Nath was doomed.

But thinking of this, Desmond saw one ray of hope. He had not been for long the companion of men of different castes without picking up a few notions of what caste meant. The Babu was a Brahman; as a Bengali he had no claim on the sympathies of the others; but as a Brahman his person to other Hindus was inviolable. The Marathas were Hindus, and they at least would not willingly raise their hand against him. Yet Desmond could not be certain on this point. During his short residence in Gheria he had found that, in the East as too often in the West, the precepts of religion were apt to be kept rather in the letter than in the spirit. He had seen the sacred cow, which no good Hindu would venture to kill for untold gold, atrociously overworked, and, when too decrepit to be of further service, left to perish miserably of neglect and starvation. It might be that although the Marathas would not themselves lay hands on the Babu, they would be quite content to look calmly on while a Mohammedan did the work.

At the best, it was Desmond and the Babu against the crew--hopeless odds, for if it came to a fight the latter would be worse than useless. Not that Desmond held the man in such scorn as the men of his own colour. Surendra Nath was certainly timid and slack, physically weak, temperamentally a coward: yet he had shown gleams of spirit during the escape, and it seemed to Desmond that he was a man who, having once been induced to enter upon a course, might prove both constant and loyal. The difficulty now was that, prostrated by his illness during the storm, he was not at his best; certainly in no condition to face a difficulty either mental or physical. So Desmond resolved not to tell him of the danger impending. He feared the effect upon his shaken nerves. He would not intentionally do anything against Desmond's interest, but he could scarcely fail to betray his anxiety to the conspirators. Feeling that there was nobody to confide in, Desmond decided that his only course was to feign ignorance of what was going on, and await events with what composure he might. Not that he would relax his watchfulness; on the contrary he was alert and keen, ready to seize with manful grip the skirts of chance.

Perhaps, he thought, the grab might fall in with a British ship. But what

would that avail? The grab with her extraordinary sailing powers could show a clean pair of heels to any Indiaman, however fast, even if he could find an opportunity of signalling for help. Fuzl Khan, without doubt, would take care that he never had such a chance.

Turning things over in his mind, and seeing no way out of his difficulty, he was at length summoned to relieve the Gujarati at the wheel. It was, he supposed, about four in the morning, and still pitch-dark. When he came to the helm Fuzl Khan was alone: there was nothing to betray the fact that the plotters had, but little before, been gathered around him. The look-out, who had left his post to join the group, had returned forward, and was now being relieved, like the Gujarati himself.

Desmond exchanged a word or two with the man, and was left alone at the wheel. His mind was still set on the problem how to frustrate the scheme of the mutineers. He was convinced that if the grab once touched shore at any point save Bombay, his plight would be hopeless. But how could he guard against the danger? Even if he could keep the navigation of the grab entirely in his own hands by remaining continuously at the helm, he was dependent on the plotters for information about the coast; to mislead him would be the easiest thing in the world. But it suddenly occurred to him that he might gain time by altering the course of the vessel. If he kept out of sight of land he might increase the chance of some diversion occurring.

Accordingly he so contrived that the grab lost rather than gained in her tacks against the light north-west wind now blowing. None of the men, except possibly the Gujarati, had sufficient seamanship to detect this manoeuvre; he had gone below, and when he came on deck again he could not tell what progress had been made during his absence. Only the mainsail, foresail, and one topsail were set: these were quite enough for the untrained crew to trim in the darkness--likely to prove too much, indeed, in the event of a sudden squall. Thus the process of going about was a long and laborious one, and at the best much way was lost.

Not long after he had begun to act on this idea he was somewhat concerned to see the serang, who was in charge of the deck watch, come aft and hang about near the wheel, as though his curiosity had been aroused. Had he any suspicions? Desmond resolved to address the man and see what he could infer from the manner of his reply.

"Is all well, serang?"

"All well, sahib," answered the man. He stopped, and seemed to hesitate whether to say more; but after a moment or two he moved slowly away. Desmond watched him. Had he discovered the trick? Would he go below and waken Fuzl Khan? Desmond could not still a momentary tremor. But the serang did not rejoin his messmates, nor go below. He walked up and down the deck alone. Apparently

he suspected nothing.

Desmond felt relieved; but though he was gaining time, he could but recognize that it seemed likely to profit him little. A criminal going to execution may step never so slowly across the prison yard; there is the inexorable gallows at the end, and certain doom. Could he not force matters, Desmond wondered? It was evidently to be a contest, whether of wits or of physical strength, between himself and the Gujarati. Without one or other the vessel could not be safely navigated; if he could in some way overcome the ringleader, he felt pretty sure that the crew would accept the result and all difficulty would be at an end. But how could he gain so unmistakable an ascendency? In physical strength Fuzl Khan was more than his match: there was no doubt of the issue of a struggle if it were a matter of sheer muscular power. For a moment he thought of attempting to enlist the Marathas on his side. They were Hindus; the Gujarati was a Muslim; and they must surely feel that, once he was among his co-religionists in Cutch, in some pirate stronghold, they would run a very poor chance of getting fair treatment. But he soon dismissed the idea. The Gujarati must seem to them much more formidable than the stripling against whom he was plotting. The Hindu, even more than the average human being elsewhere, is inclined to attach importance to might and bulk--even to mere fat. If he sounded the Marathas, and, their fear of the Gujarati outweighing their inevitable distrust of him as a Firangi, they betrayed him to curry a little favour, there was no doubt that the fate both of himself and the Babu would instantly be decided. He must trust to himself alone.

While he was still anxiously debating the matter with himself his eye caught the two muskets lashed to the wooden framework supporting the wheel. He must leave no hostages to fortune. Taking advantage of a lull in the wind he steadied the wheel with his body, and with some difficulty drew the charges and dropped them into the sea. If it came to a tussle the enemy would certainly seize the muskets; it would be worth something to Desmond to know that they were not loaded. It was, in truth, but a slight lessening of the odds against him; and as he restored the weapons to their place he felt once more how hopeless his position remained.

Thus pondering and puzzling, with no satisfaction, he spent the full period of his term of duty. At the appointed time Fuzl Khan came to relieve him. It was now full daylight; but, scanning the horizon with a restless eye, Desmond saw no sign of land, nor the sail of any vessel.

"No land yet, sahib?" said the Gujarati, apparently in surprise.

"No, as you see."

"But you set the course by the stars, sahib?"

"Oh yes; the grab must have been going slower than we imagined."

"The wind has not shifted?"

"Very little. I have had to tack several times."

The man grunted, and looked at Desmond, frowning suspiciously; but Desmond met his glance boldly, and said, as he left to go below:

"Be sure to have me called the moment you sight land."

He went below, threw himself into his hammock, and being dead tired, was soon fast asleep.

Some hours later he was called by the Babu.

"Sahib, they say land is in sight at last. I am indeed thankful. To the landlubber the swell of waves causes nauseating upheaval."

"'Tis good news indeed," said Desmond, smiling. "Come on deck with me."

They went up together. The vessel was bowling along under a brisk southwester, which he found had been blowing steadily almost from the moment he had left the helm. The land was as yet but a dim line on the horizon; it was necessary to stand in much closer if any of the landmarks were to be recognized. He took the wheel; the shade on the sea-line gradually became more definite; and in the course of an hour they opened up a fort somewhat similar in appearance to that of Gheria. All the ship's company were now on deck, looking eagerly shorewards.

"Do you know the place?" asked Desmond of the Gujarati unconcernedly.

The man gazed at it intently for a minute or so.

"Yes, sahib; it is Suvarndrug," he said. "Is it not, Nanna?"

"Yes, of a truth; it is Suvarndrug; I was there a month ago," replied the Maratha.

"What do you say, Gulam?" he continued, turning to one of the Biluchis standing near.

"It is Suvarndrug. I have seen it scores of times. No one can mistake Suvarndrug. See, there is the hill; and there is the mango grove. Oh yes, certainly it is Suvarndrug."

At this moment four grabs were seen beating out of the harbour. Fuzl Khan uttered an exclamation; then, turning to Desmond, he said with a note of anxiety:

"It is best to put about at once, sahib. See the grabs! They may be enemies."

Desmond's heart gave a jump; his pulse beat more quickly under the stress of a sudden inspiration. He felt convinced that the fortress was not Suvarndrug; the Gujarati's anxiety to pile up testimony to the contrary was almost sufficient in itself to prove that. If not Suvarndrug it was probably one of Angria's strongholds, possibly Kolaba. In that case the grabs now beating out were certainly the Pirate's, and the men knew it. Here was an opportunity, probably the only one that would occur, of grappling with the mutiny. The crew would be torn by conflicting emotions; with the prospect of recapture by Angria their action would be paralyzed; if he could take advantage of their indecision he might yet gain the upper hand. It was a risky venture; but the occasion was desperate. He could afford for the present to neglect the distant grabs, for none of the vessels on the coast could

match the *Tremukji* in speed, and bend all his energies upon the more serious danger on board.

"Surely it cannot be Suvarndrug?" he said, with an appearance of composure that he was far from feeling. "Suvarndrug, you remember, has been captured. The last news at Gheria was that it was in the Company's hands, though there was a rumour that it might be handed over to the Peshwa. We should not now see Angria's grabs coming out of Suvarndrug. But if it is Suvarndrug, Fuzl Khan, why put about? As fugitives from Gheria we should be assured of a welcome at Suvarndrug. We should be as safe there as at Bombay."

The Gujarati was none too quick-witted. He was patently taken aback, and hesitated for a reply. The grab was standing steadily on her course shorewards. Desmond was to all appearance unconcerned; but the crew were looking at one another uneasily, and the Gujarati's brow was darkening, his fidgettiness increasing. Surendra Nath was the only man among the natives who showed no anxiety. He was leaning on the taffrail, gazing almost gloatingly at the land, and paying no heed to the strange situation around him.

Desmond was watching the Gujarati keenly. The man's manner fully confirmed his suspicions, and even in the tenseness of the moment he felt a passing amusement at the big fellow's puzzle-headed attempts to invent an explanation that would square with the facts. Failing to hit upon a plausible argument, he began to bluster.

"You, Firangi, heed what I say. It is not for us to run risks: the hind does not walk open-eyed into the tiger's mouth. The grab must be put about immediately, or----"

"Who is in command?" asked Desmond quietly; "you or I?"

"We share it. I can navigate as well as you."

"You forget our arrangement in Gheria. You agreed that I should command."

"Yes, but at the pleasure of the rest. We are ten; we will have our way; the grab must be put about, at once."

"Not by me."

Desmond felt what was coming and braced himself to meet it.

Then things happened with startling rapidity. The Gujarati, with a yell of rage, made a rush towards the wheel. Knowing what to expect Desmond slipped behind it and with a few light leaps gained the deck forward. Fuzl Khan shouted to the serang to take the helm and steer the vessel out to sea; then set off in headlong pursuit of Desmond, who had now turned and stood awaiting the attack. The Gujarati did not even trouble to draw his knife. He plunged at him like a bull, shouting that he would deal with the pig of a Firangi as he had dealt with the sentinel at Gheria.

But it was not for nothing that Desmond had fought a dozen battles for the

possession of Clive's desk at school, and a dozen more for the honour of the school against the town; that his muscles had been developed by months of hard work at sea and harder work in the dockyard at Gheria. Deftly dodging the man's blind rush, he planted his bare feet firmly and threw his whole weight into a terrific body blow that sent the bigger man with a thud to the deck. Panting, breathless, trembling with fury, Fuzl Khan sprang to his feet, caught sight of the muskets, and tearing one from its fastenings raised it to his shoulder. Desmond seized the moment with a quickness that spoke volumes for his will's absolute mastery of his body. As the man pulled the harmless trigger, Desmond leapt at him; a crashing blow beneath the chin sent him staggering against the wheel; a second while he tottered brought him limp and almost stunned to the deck.

[image]

A SHORT WAY WITH MUTINEERS.

Meanwhile the crew had looked on for a few breathless moments in amazement at this sudden turn of affairs. But as the Gujarati fell Desmond heard a noise behind him. Half turning, he saw Shaik Abdullah rushing towards him with a marlinspike. The man had him at a disadvantage, for he was breathless from his tussle with Fuzl Khan; but at that moment a dark object hurtled through the air, striking this new antagonist at the back of the head, and hurling him a lifeless lump into the scuppers. Desmond looked round in wonderment: who among the crew had thus befriended him so opportunely? His wonder was not lessened when he saw the Babu, trembling like a leaf, his eyes blazing, his dusky face indescribably changed. At the sight of Desmond's peril the Bengali, forgetting his weakness, exalted above his timidity, had caught up with both hands a round nine-pounder shot that lay on deck, and in a sudden strength of fury had hurled it at the Biluchi. His aim was fatally true; the man was killed on the spot.

With his eyes Desmond thanked the Babu; there was no time for words. The hostile grabs were undoubtedly making chase. They had separated, with the intention of bearing down upon and overhauling the *Tremukji* in whatever direction she might flee. Fuzl Khan still lay helpless upon the deck.

"Secure that man," said Desmond to two of the crew. He spoke curtly and sternly, with the air of one who expected his orders to be executed without question; though he felt a touch of anxiety lest the men should still defy him. But they went about their task instantly without a word: Desmond's bold stand, and the swift overthrow of the big Gujarati, had turned the tide in his favour, and he thrilled with relief and keen pleasure that he was master of the situation.

While the ringleader of the mutineers was being firmly bound, Desmond turned to Nanna and said:

"Now, answer me at once. What is that place?"

"It is Kolaba, sahib."

"Where is Kolaba?"

"Two or three miles south of Bombay, sahib."

"Good. Run up the fore-topsail."

He went to the wheel.

"Thank you, serang. I will relieve you. Go forward and see that the men crowd on all sail."

The mutiny had been snuffed out; the men went about their work quietly, with the look of whipped dogs; and barring accidents Desmond knew that before long he would make Bombay and be safe. With every stitch of canvas set, the vessel soon showed that she had the heels of her pursuers. Before she could draw clear, two of them came within range with their bow-chasers, and their shot whistled around somewhat too close to be comfortable. But she steadily drew ahead, and ere long it was seen that the four grabs were being hopelessly outpaced. They kept up the chase for the best part of an hour, but as they neared the British port they recognized that they were running into danger and had the discretion to draw off.

Now that the pursuit was over Desmond ventured to steer due north-east, and the coast line became more distinctly visible. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, judging by the height of the sun, when the serang, pointing shorewards, said:

"There is Bombay, sahib."

"You are sure?"

"Yes; I know it by the cluster of palmyra trees. No one can mistake them."

Moment by moment the town and harbour came more clearly into view. Desmond saw an extensive castle, a flag flying on its pinnacled roof, set amid a green mass of jungle and cocoa-nut forest, with a few Portuguese-built houses dotted here and there. In front a narrow jungle-clad island, called, as he afterwards learnt, Old Woman Island, stretched like a spit into the sea. To the south of the fort was the Bunder pier, with the warehouses at the shore end. Southward of these were the hospital and the doctor's house overlooking the harbour, while hard by were the marine yard and the docks ensconced behind the royal bastion.

Feeling that he had nothing more to fear, Desmond ordered Fuzl Khan to be cast loose and brought to him. The man wore a look of sullen surprise, which Desmond cheerfully ignored.

"Now, Fuzl Khan," he said, "we are running into Bombay harbour. You know the channel?"

The man grunted a surly affirmative.

"Well, you will take the helm, and steer us in to the most convenient moorings."

He turned away, smiling at the look of utter consternation on the Gujarati's face. To be trusted after his treacherous conduct was evidently more than the man could understand. The easy unconcern with which Desmond walked away had its effect on the crew. When orders were given to take in sail they carried them out with promptitude, and Desmond chuckled as he saw them talking to one another in low tones and discussing him, as he guessed by their glances in his direction. The Gujarati performed his work at the helm skilfully, and about five o'clock, when the sun was setting, casting a romantic glow over the long straggling settlement, the *Tremukji* ran to her anchorage among a host of small craft, within a few cables-lengths of the vessels of Admiral Watson's squadron, which had arrived from Madras a few weeks before.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH

In which our hero finds himself among friends; and Colonel Clive prepares to astonish Angria.

The entrance of a strange grab had not passed unnoticed. Before the anchor had been dropped, the superintendent of marine put off in a toni.

"What grab is that?" he shouted in Urdu, as he came alongside.

"The *Tremukji*, sir," replied Desmond in English.

"Eh! what! who in the name of Jupiter are you?"

"You'd better come aboard, sir, and I'll explain," said Desmond with a smile.

The superintendent mounted the side, rapping out sundry exclamations of astonishment that amused Desmond not a little.

"Don't talk like a native! H'm! Queer! Turn him inside out! No nonsense!"

"Well, here I am," he added, stepping up to Desmond. "My name's Johnson, and I'm superintendent of marine. Now then, explain; no nonsense!"

Desmond liked the look of the little man. He was short and stout, with a very large red face, a broad turn-up nose, and childlike blue eyes that bespoke confidence at once.

"My name is Desmond Burke, sir, and I've run away from Gheria in this grab."

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes, sir. I've been a prisoner there for six months and more, and we got off a few nights ago in the darkness."

"H'm! Any more Irishmen aboard?"

"Not that I'm aware of, sir."

"And you got away from Gheria, did you? You're the first that ever I heard did so. Nothing to do with Commodore James, eh?"

"No, sir. I don't know what you mean."

"Why, Commodore James started t'other day to take a good sea-look at Gheria. There's an expedition getting ready to draw that rascally Pirate's teeth. You saw nothing of the squadron? No nonsense, now."

"Not a thing, sir. We were blown out to sea, and I suppose the Commodore passed us in the night."

"H'm! Very likely. And you weathered that storm, did you? Learnt your seamanship, eh?"

"Picked up a little on board the *Good Intent*, sir. I was ship's boy aboard."

"Mighty queer ship's boy!" said Mr. Johnson in an audible aside. "The *Good Intent's* a villainous interloper; how came you aboard of her?"

"I was in a sense tricked into it, sir, and when we got to Gheria Captain Barker and Mr. Diggle the supercargo sold me to Angria."

"Sold you to the Pirate?"

"Yes, sir."

"And where do you hail from, then?"

"Shropshire, sir; my father was Captain Richard Burke, in the Company's service."

"Jupiter! You're Dick Burke's son! Gad, sir, give me your hand; I knew Dick Burke; many's the sneaker of Bombay punch we've tossed off together. No nonsense about Dick; give me your fist. And so you sneaked out of Gheria and sailed this grab, eh? Well, you're a chip of the old block, and a credit to your old dad. I want to hear all about this. And you'll have to come ashore and see the Governor."

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Johnson, but really I can't appear before the Governor in this rig."

He glanced ruefully at his bare legs and feet and tattered garments.

"True, you en't very ship-shape, but we'll soon alter that. Ever use a razor?"

"Not yet, sir," replied Desmond with a smile.

"Thought not. Plenty of native barbers. You must get shaved. And I'll rig you up in a suit of some sort. You must see the Governor at once, and no nonsense."

"What about the grab, sir?"

"Leave that to me. You've got a pretty mixed crew, I see. All escaped prisoners too?"

"All but four."

"And not one of 'em to be trusted, I'll swear. Well I'll put a crew aboard to take charge. Come along; there's no time to lose. Colonel Clive goes to bed early."

"Colonel Clive! Is he here?"

"Yes; arrived from home two days ago. Ah! that reminds me; you're a Shropshire lad; so's he; do you know him?"

"No, sir; I've seen him; I--I----"

Desmond stammered, remembering his unfortunate encounter with Clive in Billiter Street.

"Well, well," said the superintendent, with a quizzical look; "you'll see him again. Come along."

Desmond accompanied Mr. Johnson on shore. A crowd had gathered. There were sepoys in turban, cabay,[#] and baggy drawers; bearded Arabs; Parsis in their square brimless hats; and a various assortment of habitués of the shore--crimps, landsharks, badmashes,[#] bunder[#] gangs. Seeing Desmond hold his nose at the all-prevailing stench of fish Mr. Johnson laughed.

[#] Cloak.

[#] Rowdy characters.

[#] Port.

"You'll soon get used to that," he said. "'Tis all fish-oil and bummaloes[#] in Bombay."

[#] Small fish the size of smelt, known when dried as "Bombay duck."

Having sent a trustworthy crew on board the Tremukji, the superintendent led Desmond to his house near the docks. Here, while a native barber plied his dexterous razor on Desmond's cheeks and chin, Mr. Johnson searched through a miscellaneous hoard of clothes in one of his capacious presses for an outfit. He found garments that proved a reasonable fit, and Desmond, while dressing, gave a rapid sketch of his adventures since he left the prison-shed in Gheria.

"My wigs, but you've had a time of it. Mutiny and all! Dash my buttons,

here's a tale for the ladies! Let me look at you. Yes, you'll do now, and faith you're a pretty fellow. And Dick Burke's son! You've got his nose to a T; no nonsense about that. Now you're ready to make your bow to Mr. Bourchier. He's been a coursing match with Colonel Clive and Mr. Watson[#] up Malabar Hill, and we'll catch him before he sits down to supper. How do you feel inside, by the way? Ready for a decent meal after the Pirate's hog's wash, eh?"

[#] It was customary to use the title Mr. in speaking to or of both naval and military officers.

"I'm quite comfortable inside," said Desmond smiling, "but, to tell you the truth, Mr. Johnson, I feel mighty uneasy outside. After six months of the dhoti these breeches and things seem just like bandages."

"It en't the first time you've been swaddled, if you had a mother. Well now, if you're ready. What! That rascal gashed you? Tuts! 'tis a scratch. Can't wait to doctor that. Come on."

The two made their way into the fort enclosure, and walked rapidly to Government House in the centre. In answer to Mr. Johnson the darwan[#] at the door said that the Governor would not return that night. After the coursing match he was giving a supper party at his country house at Parel.

[#] Doorkeeper.

"That's a nuisance. But we can't have any nonsense. The Governor's a bit of an autocrat; too much starch in his shirt, I say; but we'll go out to Parel and beard him, by Jove! 'Tis only five miles out, and we'll drive there in under an hour."

Turning away he hurried out past the tank-house on to the Green, and by good luck found an empty shigram[#] waiting to be hired. Desmond mounted the vehicle with no little curiosity. These great beasts with their strange humps would surely not cover five miles in less than an hour. But he was undeceived when they started. The two sturdy oxen trotted along at a good pace in obedience to the driver's goad, and the shigram rattled across Bombay Green, past the church and the whitewashed houses of the English merchants, their oyster-shell windows already lit up; and in some forty-five minutes entered a long avenue leading to Mr. Bourchier's country house. Twice during the course of the journey Desmond was interested to see the shigramwallah[#] pull his team up, dismount, and, going to their heads, insert his hand in their mouths.

[#] Carriage like a palanquin on wheels.

[#] Wallah is a personal affix, denoting a close connexion between the person and the thing described by the main word. Shigramwallah thus=carriage-driver.

"What does he do that for?" he asked.

"To clear their throats, to be sure. When the beasts go at this pace they make a terrible lot of foam, and if he didn't swab it out they'd choke, and no nonsense. Well, here we are. Dash my wig, won't his Excellency open his eyes!"

Since their departure from the fort the sky had become quite dark. At the end of the avenue they could see the lights of Governor Bourchier's bungalow, and by and by caught sight of figures sitting on the veranda. Desmond's heart beat high; he made no doubt that one of them was Clive; the moment to which he had looked forward so eagerly was at last at hand. He was in no dreamland; his dream had come true. He felt a little nervous at the prospect of meeting men so famous, so immeasurably above him, as Clive and Admiral Watson; but with Clive he felt a bond of union in his birthplace, and it was with recovered confidence that he sprang out of the cart and accompanied Mr. Johnson to the bungalow. He was further reassured by a jolly laugh that rang out just as he reached the steps leading up to the veranda.

"Hallo, Johnson!" said a voice, "what does this mean?"

"I've come to see the Governor, Captain."

"Then you couldn't have come at a worse time. The supper's half an hour late, and you know what that means to the Governor."

Mr. Johnson smiled.

"He'll forget his supper when he has heard my news. 'Tis about the Pirate."

"What's that?" said another voice. "News of the Pirate?"

"Yes, Mr. Watson. This young gentleman----"

But he was interrupted by the khansaman,[#] who came out at this moment and with a salaam announced that supper was served.

[#] Butler.

"You'd better come in, Johnson," said the first speaker. "Any news of the Pirate will be sauce to Mr. Bourchier's goose."

The gentlemen rose from their seats, and went into the house, followed by Desmond and the superintendent. In a moment Desmond found himself in a large room brilliantly lighted with candles. In the centre was a round table, and Mr.

Bourchier, the Governor, was placing his guests. He did not look very pleasant, and when he saw Mr. Johnson he said:

"You come at a somewhat unseasonable hour, sir. Cannot your business wait till the morning?"

"I made bold to come, your Excellency, because 'tis a piece of news the like of which no one in Bombay has ever heard before. This young gentleman, Mr. Desmond Burke, son of Captain Burke, whom you'll remember, sir, has escaped from Gheria."

The Governor and his guests were by this time seated, and instantly all eyes were focussed on Desmond, and exclamations of astonishment broke from their lips.

"Indeed! Bring chairs, Hossain."

One of the native attendants left the room noiselessly, and returning with chairs placed them at the table.

"Sit down, gentlemen. That is amazing news, as you say, Mr. Johnson. Perhaps Mr. Burke will relate his adventure as we eat."

Desmond took the chair set for him. The guests were five. Two of them wore the laced coats of admirals; the taller, a man of handsome presence, with a round chubby face, large eyes, small full lips, his head crowned by a neat curled wig, was Charles Watson, in command of the British fleet; the other was his second, Rear-Admiral Pocock. A third was Richard King, captain of an Indiaman, in a blue coat with velvet lappets and gold embroidery, buff waistcoat and breeches. Next him sat a jolly red-faced gentleman in plain attire, and between him and the Governor was Clive himself, whose striking face--the lawyer's brow, the warrior's nose and chin, the dreamer's mouth--would have marked him out in any company.

Desmond began his story. The barefooted attendants moved quietly about with the dishes, but the food was almost neglected as the six gentlemen listened to the clear, low voice telling of the escape from the fort, the capture of the grab, and the eventful voyage to Bombay harbour.

"By George! 'tis a famous adventure," exclaimed Admiral Watson, when the story was ended. "What about this Pirate's den? Gheria fort is said to be impregnable; what are the chances if we attack, eh? The approaches to the harbour, now; do you know the depth of water?"

"Vessels can stand in to three fathoms water, sir. Seven fathoms is within point-blank shot of the fort. The walls are about fifty feet high; there are twenty-seven bastions, and they mount more than two hundred guns."

"And the opposite shore?"

"A flat tableland, within distance for bombarding. A diversion might be made from there while the principal attack could be carried on in the harbour, or from a hill south of the fort."

"Is the landing easy?"

"Yes, sir. There are three sandy bays under the hill, without any surf to make landing difficult. One is out of the line of fire from the fort."

"And what about the land side? There's a town, is there not?"

"On a neck of land, sir. There's a wall, but nothing to keep out a considerable force. If an attack were made from that side the people would, I think, flock into the fort."

"And is that as strong as rumour says?"

"'Tis pretty strong, sir; there are double walls, and thick ones; they'd stand a good battering."

"It seems to me, Admiral," said the red-faced gentleman, with a laugh, "that you've learnt all you sent Commodore James to find out. What do you say, Mr. Clive?"

"It seems so, Mr. Merriman. But I think, Mr. Watson, in our eagerness to learn something of Gheria, we must seem somewhat cavalier to this lad, whose interest in our plans cannot be equal to our own. You have shown, sir," he added, addressing Desmond, "great spirit and courage, not less ingenuity, in your daring escape from the Pirate. But I want to go farther back. How came you to fall into the Pirate's hands? You have told us only part of your story."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Bourchier. "If you are not tired, we shall be vastly pleased to hear more, Mr. Burke."

"Your name is Burke?" interrupted Clive. "I had not before caught it. May I ask what part of Ireland you come from, sir? Pardon me, but your accent smacks more of Shropshire than of County Dublin."

"'Tis Shropshire, sir; I come from Market Drayton." ("Like yourself!" his glowing cheeks and flashing eyes seemed to say. This was the proudest moment in Desmond's life as yet.)

"I was not mistaken," said Clive. "I remember a schoolfellow of mine of your name; let me see----"

"Richard Burke, sir, my brother; my father was Captain Burke in the Company's service."

"Sure I have it now. I remember him: a tall, fine old sea-dog whom I saw at times in Market Drayton when I was a child. I had a great awe of Captain Burke--i' faith the only man I was afraid of. And you are his son!--But come, I am interrupting your story."

Desmond spoke of his longing for adventure, which had led him to leave home in search of fortune. He glossed over his brother's ill-treatment. He told how he had been inveigled on board the *Good Intent*, and handed over to Angria when the vessel arrived at Gheria. He mentioned no names except that of Captain Barker, though he could not have explained his motive in keeping silence about

Diggle.

"Barker is a villain, ripe for the gallows," said Captain King. "But Mr. Burke, I don't understand how you came to be so hoodwinked in London. Sure you must have known that a boy without an ounce of experience would never be made supercargo. Had you any enemies in London?"

"I didn't know that I had, sir, till the *Good Intent* had sailed. I was deceived, but the man who promised me the berth was very friendly, and I didn't suspect him."

"It was not Barker, then?"

"No, sir; it was a man I met at Market Drayton."

"At Market Drayton?" said Clive. "That's odd. What was his name?"

"His name was Diggle, and----"

"A stranger? I remember no one of that name," said Clive.

"I thought he was a stranger, sir; but of late I have begun to suspect he was not such a stranger as he seemed."

"How did you meet him?"

"Accidentally, sir, the night of your banquet in Market Drayton."

"Indeed! 'Tis all vastly curious. Was he lodging in the town?"

"He came in from Chester that night and lodged at the *Four Alls*."

"With that disreputable sot Grinsell----" Clive paused. "Did he tell you anything about himself?

"Very little, sir, except that he'd been unlucky. I think he mentioned once that he was a fellow at a Cambridge college, but he spoke to me most about India."

As he put his questions Clive leant forward, and seemed to become more keenly interested with every answer. He now turned and gave a hard look at the bluff man whom he had called Mr. Merriman. The rest of the company were silent.

"Do you happen to know whether he went up to the Hall?" asked Clive.

"Sir Willoughby's? I met him several times walking in that neighbourhood, but I don't think he went to the Hall. He did not appear to know Sir Willoughby.--And yet, sir, I remember now that I heard Diggle and Grinsell talking about the Squire the night I first saw them together at the *Four Alls*."

"And you were with this--Diggle, in London, Mr. Burke?"

"Yes, sir."

Desmond began to feel uncomfortable. Clive had evidently not recognized him before, and he was hoping that the unfortunate incident in Billiter Street would not be recalled. Clive's next words made him wish to sink into the floor.

"Do you remember, Mr. Burke, in London, throwing yourself in the way of a gentleman that was in pursuit of your friend Mr. Diggle, and bringing him to the ground?"

"Yes, sir, I did, and I am sorry for it."

Desmond did not like the grim tone of Clive's voice; he wished he would address him as "my lad" instead of "Mr. Burke."

"That was a bad start, let me say, Mr. Burke--an uncommonly bad start."

"Oh come, Mr. Clive!" broke in Mr. Merriman, "say no more about that. The boy was in bad company: 'twas not his fault. In truth, 'twas my own fault: I am impetuous; the sight of that scoundrel was too much for me. I bear you no grudge, my lad, though I had a bump on my head for a week afterwards. Had you not tripped me I should have run my rapier through the villain, and there would like have been an end of me."

"Shall I tell the boy, Mr. Merriman?" said Clive in an undertone.

"Not now, not now," said Merriman quickly.

The other gentlemen, during this dialogue, had been discussing the information they had gained about Gheria.

"Well," said Clive, "you are lucky, let me tell you, Mr. Burke, to be out of this Diggle's clutches. By the way, have you seen him since he sold you to the Pirate?"

"He came a few days before I escaped, and wanted me to come here as a spy. Angria promised me my freedom and a large sum of money."

"What's that?" cried Merriman. "Wanted you to come as a spy?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him he might do it himself."

"A palpable hit!" said Merriman with a grim laugh, "and a very proper answer. But he'll have more respect for his skin."

"Gentlemen," put in Mr. Bourchier, "we have kept Mr. Burke talking so much that he hasn't had a mouthful of food. I think we might go out on the veranda and smoke our cheroots while he takes some supper. Mr. Johnson, you've done most justice to my viands, I think. Perhaps you will join us."

The superintendent became purple in the face. He had in fact been eating and drinking with great gusto, taking advantage of the preoccupation of the company to ensure that the excellent fare should not be wasted. He rose hurriedly, and, with a sheepish look that scarcely fitted his cheerful features, followed his sarcastic host to the veranda. All the guests save Mr. Merriman accompanied Mr. Bourchier.

"They all want to talk shop--this expedition against the Pirate," said Mr. Merriman. "You and I can have a little chat."

Desmond was attracted by the open face of his new acquaintance, slightly disfigured, as he noticed, by a long scar on the left temple.

"You're plucky and lucky," continued Merriman, "and in spite of what Mr. Clive calls your bad start in bowling me over, you'll do well."

His face clouded as he went on:

"That man Diggle: why should he have sold you to the Pirate: what had he against you?"

"I cannot imagine, sir."

"You are lucky to have escaped him, as Mr. Clive said. I think--yes, I will tell you about him. His name is not Diggle; it is Simon Peloti. He is a nephew of Sir Willoughby. His mother married a Greek, against her brother's wish; the man died when the child was a year old. As a boy Peloti was as charming a little fellow as one could wish: handsome, high-spirited, clever. He did well at school, and afterwards at Cambridge: won a fellowship there. Then he went to the dogs--not all at once; men never do. He was absolutely without principle, and thought of nothing but his own ease and success. One thing led to another; at last, in the '45----"

He paused. After a moment he went on:

"I had a brother, my lad----"

He stopped again, his face expressing poignant grief.

"I know, sir," said Desmond. "Sir Willoughby told me."

"He told you! And he did not mention Peloti?"

"No, sir; but I see it all now. It was Diggle--Peloti, I mean--who betrayed your brother. I understand now why the Squire took no steps against Grinsell. His accomplice was Diggle."

He related the incident of the housebreakers.

"Yes," said Merriman, "that throws a light on things. Peloti, I imagine, had previously seen the Squire, and tried to get money from him. Sir Willoughby refused: he gave him a thousand pounds ten years ago on condition he left the country and did not return. So the villain resolved to rob him. 'Twas fortunate indeed you appeared in time. That is the reason for his hating you."

"There was another, sir," said Desmond with some hesitation. "He thought I was hankering after the Squire's property--aiming at becoming his heir. 'Twas ridiculous, sir; such an idea never entered my head."

"I see. Peloti came to India and got employment in the Company's service at Madras. But he behaved so badly that he had to be turned out--he said Mr. Clive hounded him out. What became of him after that I don't know. But let us leave the miserable subject. Tell me, what are your ideas? What are you going to do now that you are a free man once more? Get another berth as supercargo?"

His eyes twinkled as he said this.

"No thank you, sir; once bit twice shy. I haven't really thought of anything definite, but what I should like best of all would be a cadetship under Colonel Clive."

"Soho! You're a fighter, are you? But of course you are; I have reason to

know that. Well, we'll see what my friend Mr. Clive says. You've no money, I suppose?"

"Not a halfpenny, sir; but if the Governor will admit that the grab is my lawful prize, I thought of selling her; that will bring me a few pounds."

"Capital idea. Punctilio won't stand in the way of that, I should think. Well now, I'll speak to Mr. Clive for you, but don't build too much on it. He cannot give you a commission, I fear, without the authority of the Governor of Madras; and though no doubt a word from him would be effectual, he's a very particular man, and you'll have to prove you're fit for a soldier's life. Meanwhile, what do you say to this? I've taken a fancy to you. I'm a merchant; trade pays better than soldiering, in general. I've got ships of my own, and I daresay I could find a berth for you on one of them. You seem to know something of navigation?"

"Very little, sir; just what I picked up on the *Good Intent*."

"Well, that's a beginning. I've no doubt that Admiral Watson will wish you to go to Gheria with him: your knowledge of the place will be useful. He won't start for a month or two: why not occupy the time in improving your navigation, so that if there are difficulties about a cadetship you'll be competent for a mate's berth? Nothing like having two strings to your bow. What do you say to that?"

"'Tis very good of you, sir; I accept with pleasure."

"That's right. Now when you've finished that curry we'll go out on the veranda. Before you came they were talking of nothing but their dogs; but I wager 'tis nothing but the Pirate now."

They soon rejoined the other gentlemen.

"Come, Mr. Burke," said Admiral Watson, "we've been talking over the information you've given us. You've nothing to do, I suppose?"

"I've just suggested that he should read up navigation, Mr. Watson," said Merriman.

"You're a wizard, Mr. Merriman. I was proposing to engage Mr. Burke to accompany us on our expedition against the Pirate. He can make himself useful when we get to Gheria. We'll see how James's information tallies with his. You won't object to serve his Majesty, Mr. Burke?"

"'Tis what I should like best in the world, sir."

"Very well. Meanwhile learn all you can; Captain King here will take charge of you, I've no doubt."

"Certainly, Mr. Watson."

"You will give Mr. Burke quarters for the present, Mr. Johnson?" said Merriman.

"To be sure. And as 'tis late we'd better be going. Good night, your Excellency; good night, gentlemen."

Early next day Admiral Watson himself rode down to the harbour to in-

spect the grab. He was so much pleased with her that he offered to buy her for the service. Before the day was out Desmond found himself in possession of seven thousand rupees. After paying the Marathas the wages agreed upon, he proceeded to divide the balance. He retained two shares for himself, and gave each of the men who had escaped with him an equal part. No one was more surprised than Fuzl Khan when he received his share in full. He had expected to get the punishment he knew he well deserved. But Desmond, against the advice of the superintendent, determined to overlook the man's misconduct. He went further. At his request Admiral Watson gave him a place on the grab. The Gujarati seemed overwhelmed by this generosity on the part of a man he had wronged, and for the nonce breaking through his usual morose reserve, he thanked Desmond, awkwardly indeed, but with manifest sincerity.

The other men were no less delighted with their good fortune. The sum they each received made them rich men for life. None was more elated than Surendra Nath. It happened that Mr. Merriman came on board to see the grab at the moment when Desmond was distributing the prize money. Desmond noticed a curious expression on the Babu's face, and he was compelled to laugh when the man, after a moment's hesitation, walked up to Mr. Merriman, and with a strange mixture of humility and importance said:

"I wish you a very good morning, your honour."

"Good gad!--Surendra Nath Chuckerbutti! I'm uncommonly glad to see you."

He shook hands warmly, a mark of condescension which made the Babu beam with gratification.

"Why," continued Merriman, "we'd given you up for dead long ago. So you're the plucky and ingenious fellow who did so much to help Mr. Burke in the famous escape! Surendra Nath was one of my best clerks, Mr. Burke. His father is my head clerk for Company's business. He hasn't been the same man since you disappeared. You must tell me your story. Come up to Mr. Bowman's house on the Green to-night; I am staying there."

"I shall be most glad to return to my desk in Calcutta, your honour," said the Babu. "But I do not like the sea. It has no sympathy with me. I think of accomplishing the journey by land."

"Good heavens, man! it would take you a year at the least, if you wasn't swallowed by a tiger or strangled by a Thug on the way. You'll have to go by water, as you came."

The Babu's face fell.

"That is the fly in the ointment, your honour. But I will chew majum and bestow myself in the cabin; thus perhaps I may avoid squeamishness. By the kindness of Burke Sahib I have a modicum of money, now a small capital; and I

hope, with your honour's permission, to do trifling trade for myself."

"Certainly," said Merriman with a laugh. "You'll be a rich man yet, Surendra Nath. Well, don't forget; you'll find me at Mr. Bowman's on the Green at eight o'clock."

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH

In which Angria is astonished; and our hero begins to pay off old scores.

Time sped quickly. Desmond made the best use of his opportunities of learning navigation under Captain King and the superintendent, and before two months had expired was pronounced fit to act as mate on the finest East Indiaman afloat. He took this with a grain of salt. The fact was that his adventures, the modesty with which he deprecated all allusions to his part in the escape from Gheria, and the industry with which he worked, won him the goodwill of all; he was a general favourite with the little European community of Bombay.

Apart from his study, he found plenty to interest him in his spare moments. The strange mixture of people, the temples and pagodas, the towers of silence on which the Parsis exposed their dead, the burning ghats of the Hindus on the beach, the gaunt filthy fakirs[#] and jogis who whined and told fortunes in the streets for alms, the exercising of the troops, the refitting and careening of Admiral Watson's ships--all this provided endless matter for curiosity and amusement. One thing disappointed him. Not once during the two months did he come in contact with Clive. Mr. Merriman remained in Bombay, awaiting the arrival of a vessel of his from Muscat; but Desmond was loth to ask him whether he had sounded Clive about a cadetship. As a matter of fact Mr. Merriman had mentioned the matter at once.

[#] Religious mendicants (Mohammedan).

"Patience, Merriman," was Clive's reply. "I have my eye on the youngster."

And with that the merchant, knowing his friend, was very well content; but

he kept his own counsel.

At length, one day in the first week of February 1756, Desmond received a summons to visit the Admiral. His interview was brief. He was directed to place himself under the orders of Captain Latham on the *Tyger*; the fleet was about to sail.

It was a bright, cool February morning, cool, that is, for Bombay, when the vessels weighed anchor and sailed slowly out of the harbour. All Bombay lined the shores: natives of every hue and every mode of attire; English merchants; ladies fluttering white handkerchiefs. Such an expedition had never been undertaken against the noted Pirate before, and the report of Commodore James, confirming the information brought by Desmond, had given the authorities good hope that this pest of the Malabar coast was at last to be destroyed.

It was an inspiriting sight as the vessels, rounding the point, made under full sail to the south. There were six line-of-battle ships, six Company's vessels, five bomb-ketches, four Maratha grabs--one of them Angria's own grab, the *Tremukji*, on which Desmond had escaped--and forty gallivats. The *Tyger* led the van. Admiral Watson's flag was hoisted on the *Kent*, Admiral Pocock's on the *Cumberland*. On board the fleet were 200 European soldiers, 300 sepoys, and 300 Topasses--mainly half-caste Portuguese in the service of the Company, owing their name to the topi[#] they wore. To co-operate with this force a land army of 12,000 Marathas, horse and foot, under the command of Ramaji Punt, one of the Peshwa's generals, had been for some time investing the town of Gheria.

[#] Hat.

At this time of year the winds were so slight and variable that it was nearly a week before the fleet arrived off Gheria. When the bastions of the fort hove into sight Desmond could not help contrasting his feelings with those of two months before.

"Like the look of your cage, Mr. Burke?" said Captain Latham at his elbow.

"I was just thinking of it, sir," said Desmond. "It makes a very great difference when you're outside the bars."

"And we'll break those bars before we're much older, or I'm a Dutchman."

At this moment the signal to heave-to was seen flying at the masthead of the *Kent*. Before the vessels had anchored one of the grabs left the main fleet and ran into the harbour. It bore a message from Admiral Watson to Tulaji Angria, summoning him to surrender. The answer returned was that if the Admiral desired to be master of the fort he must take it by force, as Angria was resolved to defend

it to the last extremity. The ships remained at anchor outside the harbour during the night. Next morning a boat put off from the town end of the fort conveying several of Angria's relatives and some officers of Ramaji Punt's army. It by and by became known that Tulaji Angria, leaving his brother in charge of the fort, had given himself up to Ramaji Punt, and was now a prisoner in his camp. The visitors had come ostensibly to view the squadron, but really to discover what were Admiral Watson's intentions in regard to the disposal of the fort supposing it fell into his hands. The Admiral saw through the device, which was no doubt to hand the fort over to the Peshwa's general, and so balk the British of their legitimate prize. Admiral Watson made short work of the visitors. He told them that if Angria would surrender his fort peaceably he and his family would be protected; but that the fort he must have. They pleaded for a few days' grace, but the Admiral declined to wait a single day. If the fort was not immediately given up he would sail in and attack it.

It was evident that hostilities could not be avoided. About one in the afternoon Captain Henry Smith of the *Kingfisher* sloop was ordered to lead the way, and Desmond was sent to join him.

"What is the depth under the walls, Mr. Burke?" the Captain asked him.

"Three and a half fathoms, sir--deep enough to float the biggest of us."

The sloop weighed anchor, and stood in before the afternoon breeze. It was an imposing sight as the fleet formed in two divisions and came slowly in their wake. Each ship covered a bomb-ketch, protecting the smaller vessels from the enemy's fire. Desmond himself was kept very busy, going from ship to ship as ordered by signals from the *Kent*, and assisting each captain in turn to navigate the unfamiliar harbour.

It was just two o'clock when the engagement began with a shot from the fort at the *Kingfisher*. The shot was returned, and a quarter of an hour later, while the fleet was still under full sail, the *Kent* flew the signal for a general action. One by one the vessels anchored at various points opposite the fortifications, and soon a hundred and fifty guns were blazing away at the massive bastions and curtains, answered vigorously by Angria's two hundred and fifty. Desmond was all excitement. The deafening roar of the guns, the huge columns of smoke that floated heavily over the fort, and sometimes enveloped the vessels, the bray of trumpets, the beating of tom-toms, the shouts of men, set his blood tingling: and though he afterwards witnessed other stirring scenes, he never forgot the vivid impression of the fight at Gheria.

About three o'clock a shell set fire to one of the Pirate's grabs--one that had formerly been taken by him from the Company. Leaving its moorings, it drifted among the main fleet of pirate grabs which still lay lashed together Where Desmond had last seen them by the blaze of the burning gallivats. They were soon

alight. The fire rapidly spread to the dockyard, caught the unfinished grabs on the stocks, and before long the whole of Angria's shipping was a mass of flame.

Meanwhile the bombardment had made little impression on the fortifications, and it appeared to the Admiral that time was being wasted. Accordingly he gave orders to elevate the guns and fire over the walls into the interior of the fort. A shell from one of the bomb-ketches fell plump into one of the outhouses of the palace and set it on fire. Fanned by the west wind, the flames spread to the arsenal and the storehouse, licking up the sheds and smaller buildings until they reached the outskirts of the city. The crackling of flames was now mingled with the din of artillery, and as dusk drew on, the sky was lit up over a large space with the red glow of burning. By half-past six the guns on the bastions had been silenced, and the Admiral gave the signal to cease fire.

Some time before this a message reached Captain Smith ordering him to send Desmond at once on board the *Kent*. When he stepped on deck he found Admiral Watson in consultation with Clive. It appeared that during the afternoon a cloud of horsemen had been observed hovering on a hill eastward of the city, and being by no means sure of the loyalty of the Maratha allies, Clive had come to the conclusion that it was time to land his troops. But it was important that the shore and the neck of land east of the fort should be reconnoitred before the landing was attempted. The groves might, for all he knew, be occupied by the Pirate's troops or by those of Ramaji Punt, and Clive had had enough experience of native treachery to be well on his guard.

"I am going to send you on a somewhat delicate mission, Mr. Burke," he said. "You know the ground. I want you to go quietly on shore and see first of all whether there is safe landing for us, and then whether the ground between the town and the fort is occupied. Be quick and secret; I need waste no words. Mr. Watson has a boat's crew ready."

"I think, sir," said Desmond, "that it will hardly be necessary, perhaps not advisable, to take a boat's crew from this ship. If I might have a couple of natives there would be a good deal less risk in getting ashore."

"Certainly. But there is no time to spare; indeed, if you are not back in a couple of hours I shall land at once. But I should like to know what we have to expect. You had better get a couple of men from the nearest grab."

"The *Tremukji* is only a few cables-lengths away, sir, and there's a man on board who knows the harbour. I will take him, with your permission."

"Very well. Good luck go with you."

Desmond saluted, and stepping into the boat which had rowed him to the *Kent*, he was quickly conveyed to the grab. In a few minutes he left this in a skiff, accompanied only by Fuzl Khan and a lascar. Not till then did he explain what he required of them. The Gujarati seemed overcome by the selection of himself for

this mission.

"You are kind to me, sahib," he said. "I do not deserve it; but I will serve you to my life's end."

There was in the man's tone a fervency which touched Desmond at the time, and which he had good cause afterwards to remember.

A quarter of an hour after Desmond quitted the deck of the *Kent*, he was put ashore at a sandy bay at the further extremity of the isthmus, hidden from the fort by a small clump of mango trees.

"Now, Fuzl Khan," he said, "you will wait here for a few minutes till it is quite dark, then you will row quickly along the shore till you come to within a short distance of the jetty. I am going across the sand up toward the fort, and will come round to you."

He stepped over the soft sand towards the trees and was lost to sight. The bombardment had now ceased, and though he heard a confused noise from the direction of the fort, there was no sound from the town, and he concluded that the people had fled either into the fort or away into the country. It appeared at present that the whole stretch of land between the town and the fort was deserted.

He had not walked far when he was startled by hearing, as he fancied, a stealthy footstep following him. Gripping in his right hand the pistol he had brought as a precaution, and with the left loosening his sword in its scabbard, he faced round with his back to the wall of a shed in which Angria's ropes were made, and waited, listening intently. But the sound, slight as it was, had ceased. Possibly it had been made by some animal, though that seemed scarcely likely: the noise and the glare from the burning buildings must surely have scared away all the animals in the neighbourhood. Finding that the sound was not repeated, he went on again. Some minutes later, his ears on the stretch, he fancied he caught the same soft furtive tread: but when he stopped and listened and heard nothing, he believed that he must have been mistaken, and set it down as an echo of his own excitement.

Stepping warily, he picked his way through the darkness, faintly illumined by the distant glow of the conflagration. He skirted the dockyard, and drew nearer to the walls of the courtyard surrounding the fort, remembering how, nearly twelve months before, he had come almost the same way from the jetty with the decoy message from Captain Barker. Then he had been a source of amusement to crowds of natives as he passed on his way to the palace; now the spot was deserted, and but for the noises that reached him from distant quarters he might have thought himself the sole living creature in that once populous settlement.

He had now reached the outer wall, which was separated from the fort only by a wide compound dotted here and there with palm-trees. It was clear that no force, whether of the Pirate's men or of Ramaji Punt's, held the ground between

the shore and the fort. All the fighting men had without doubt been withdrawn within the walls. His mission was accomplished.

It had been his intention to make his way back by a shorter cut along the outer wall, by the west side of the dockyard, until he reached the shore near the jetty. But standing for a moment under the shade of a palm-tree, he hesitated to carry out his plan, for the path he meant to follow must be lit up along its whole course by a double glare: from the blazing buildings inside the fort, and from the burning gallivats in the dockyard and harbour. He was on the point of retracing his steps when, looking over the low wall towards the fort, he saw two dark figures approaching, moving swiftly from tree to tree, as if wishing to escape observation. It was too late to move now; if he left the shelter of the palm-tree he would come distinctly into view of the two men, and it would be unwise to risk anything that would delay his return to Clive. Accordingly he kept well in the shadow and waited. The stealthy movements of the men suggested that they were fugitives, eager to get away with whole skins before the fort was stormed.

They came to the last of the palm-trees within the wall, and paused there for a brief space. A few yards of open ground separated them from the gate. Desmond watched curiously, then with some anxiety, for it suddenly struck him that the men were making for him, and that he had actually been shadowed from his landing-place by some one acting, strange as it seemed, in collusion with them. On all accounts it was necessary to keep close.

Suddenly he saw the men leave the shelter of their tree and run rapidly across the ground to the gate. Having reached it, they turned aside into the shadow of the wall and stood as if to recover breath. Desmond had kept his eyes upon them all the time. Previously, in the shade of the trees, their faces had not been clearly distinguishable; but while now invisible from the fort, they were lit up by the glow from the harbour. It was with a shock of surprise that he recognized in the fugitives the overseer of the dockyard, whose cruelties he had so good reason to remember, and Marmaduke Diggle, as he still must call him. The sight of the latter set his nerves tingling; his fingers itched to take some toll for the miseries he had endured through Diggle's villainy. But he checked his impulse to rush forward and confront the man. Single-handed he could not cope with both the fugitives; and though, if he had been free, he might have cast all prudence from him in his longing to bring the man to book, he recollected his duty to Clive and remained in silent rage beneath the tree.

All at once he heard a rustle behind him, a low growl like that of an animal enraged; and almost before he was aware of what was happening a dark figure sprang past him, leapt over the ground with the rapidity of a panther, and threw himself upon the overseer just as with Diggle he was beginning to move towards the town. There was a cry from each man, and the red light falling upon the face

of the assailant, Desmond saw with amazement that it was the Gujarati, whom he had supposed to be rowing along the shore to meet him. He had hardly recognized the man before he saw that he was at deadly grips with the overseer, both snarling like wild beasts. There was no time for thought, for Diggle, momentarily taken aback by the sudden onslaught, had recovered himself and was making with drawn sword towards the two combatants, who in their struggle had moved away from him.

Desmond no longer stayed to weigh possibilities or count risks. It was clear that Fuzl Khan's first onslaught had failed; had he got home, the overseer, powerful as he was, must have been killed on the spot. In the darkness the Gujarati's knife had probably missed its aim. He had now two enemies to deal with, and but for intervention he must soon be overcome and slain. Drawing his sword, Desmond sprang from the tree and dashed across the open, reaching the scene of the struggle just in the nick of time to strike up Diggle's weapon ere it sheathed itself in the Gujarati's side. Diggle turned with a startled oath, and seeing who his assailant was, he left his companion to take care of himself and faced Desmond, a smile of anticipated triumph wreathing his lips.

No word was spoken. Diggle lunged, and Desmond at that moment knew that he was at a perilous crisis of his life. The movements of the practised swordsman could not be mistaken; he himself had little experience; all that he could rely on was his quick eye and the toughness of his muscles. He gave back, parrying the lunge, tempted to use his pistol upon his adversary. But now that the cannonading had ceased, a shot might be heard by some of the Pirate's men, and before he could escape he might be beset by a crowd of ruffians against whom he would have no chance at all. He could but defend himself with his sword and hope that Diggle might overreach himself in his fury and give him an opportunity to get home a blow.

Steel struck upon steel; the sparks flew; and the evil smile upon Diggle's face became fixed as he saw that Desmond was no match for him in swordsmanship. But it changed when he found that though his young opponent's science was at fault, his strength and dexterity, his wariness in avoiding a close attack, served him in good stead. Impatient to finish the fight, he took a step forward, and lunged so rapidly that Desmond could hardly have escaped his blade but for an accident. There was a choking sob to his right, and just as Diggle's sword was flashing towards him a heavy form fell against the blade and upon Desmond. In the course of their deadly struggle the Gujarati and the overseer had shifted their ground, and at this moment, fortunately for Desmond, Fuzl Khan had driven his knife into his old oppressor's heart.

But the same accident that saved Desmond's life gave Diggle an opportunity of which he was quick to avail himself. Before Desmond could recover his footing,

Diggle shortened his arm and was about to drive his sword through the lad's heart. The Gujarati saw the movement. Springing in with uplifted knife he attempted to turn the blade. He succeeded; he struck it upwards, but the force with which he had thrown himself between the two swordsmen was his undoing. Unable to check his rush, he received the point of Diggle's sword in his throat. With a terrible cry he raised his hands to clutch his assailant; but his strength failed him; he swayed, tottered, and fell gasping at Desmond's feet, beside the lifeless overseer. Desmond saw that the turn of fortune had given the opportunity to him. He sprang forward as Diggle tried to recover his sword Diggle gave way: and before he could lift his dripping weapon to parry the stroke, Desmond's blade was through his forearm. Panting with rage he sought with his left hand to draw his pistol; but Desmond was beforehand with him. He caught his arm, wrenched the pistol from him, and, breathless with his exertions, said:

"You are my prisoner."

"'Tis fate, my young friend," said Diggle, with all his old blandness; Desmond never ceased to be amazed at the self-command of this extraordinary man. "I have let some blood, I perceive; my sword-arm is for the time disabled; but my great regret at this moment--you will understand the feeling--is that this gallant friend of yours lies low with the wound intended for another. So Antores received in his flank the lance hurled at Lausus: 'infelix alieno volnere'."

"I dare say, Mr. Diggle," interrupted Desmond, "but I have no time to construe Latin." Covering Diggle with his pistol, Desmond stooped over Fuzl Khan's prostrate body and discovered in a moment that the poor fellow's heart had ceased to beat. He rose, and added: "I must trouble you to come with me; and quickly, for you perceive you are at my mercy."

"Where do you propose to take me, my friend?"

"We will go this way, and please step out."

Diggle scowled, and stood as though meditating resistance.

"Come, come, Mr. Diggle, you have no choice. I do not wish to have to drag you; it might cause you pain."

"Surely you will spare a moment to an old friend! I fear you are entirely mistaken. 'Tis pity that with the natural ebullition of your youthful spirit you should have set upon a man whom----"

"You can talk as we go, Mr. Diggle, if you talk low enough. Must I repeat it?"

"But where are we going? Really, Mr. Burke, respect for my years should prompt a more considerate treatment."

"You see yonder point?" said Desmond impatiently--"yonder on the shore. You will come with me there."

Diggle looked round as if hoping that even now something might happen

in his favour. But no one was in sight; Desmond stood over him with sword still drawn; and recognizing his helplessness the man at length turned towards the shore and began to walk slowly along, Desmond a foot or so in the rear.

"'Twas a most strange chance, surely," he said, "that brought you to this spot at the very moment when I was shaking the dust of Gheria from my feet. How impossible it is to escape the penalty of one's wrong-doing! Old Horace knew it: 'Raro antecedentem scelestum'--you remember the rest. Mr. Burslem drubbed our Latin into us, Mr. Burke. I am a fellow-townsman of yours, though you did not know it: ay, a boy in your old school, switched by your old master. I have treated you badly. I admit it; but what could I do? Your brother slandered you; I see now how he deceived me; he wished you out of his way. Here I acted under pressure of Angria; he was bent on sending you to Bombay; I could not defy him; I was wrong; what you said when I saw you last made a deep impression on me; I repented, and, as Tully, I think, puts it, 'a change of plan is the best harbour to a penitent man.' I was indeed seeking that refuge of the repentant, and altering my whole plan of life; and if you will but tarry a moment----"

"Keep on, Mr. Diggle," said Desmond, as the man, who had been talking over his shoulder, half-stopped: "my point is sharp."

"I was leaving the fort, as you saw. Not from any fear--you will acquit me of that, and as you know, the fort is impregnable, and I might have remained there in perfect safety. No, I was quitting it because I was wearied, disgusted with Angria and his ways. 'Twas under a misapprehension I for a time consorted with him; I am disabused, and it is by the mere malignity of Fate that at this turning-point of my career I encounter one whom, I acknowledge, I have wronged. I am beaten; I do not blink that; and by a better man. But youth is generous; and you, Mr. Burke, are not the man to press your advantage against one who all his life has been the sport of evil circumstance. I was bound for further India; I know a little port to the south where I should have taken ship, with strong hope of getting useful and honourable employment when my voyage was ended. Perchance you have heard of Alivirdi Khan; if you would but pause a moment----"

"Go on, Mr. Diggle," said Desmond inexorably; "and it will be well to mend your pace."

"Alivirdi Khan," resumed Diggle, speaking more rapidly--the waters of the harbour, glowing red, were in sight--"Alivirdi Khan is sick unto death. He is wealthy beyond all imaginings. His likeliest heir, Siraj-uddaula, soon to be Subah[#] of Bengal, is well known to me, and indeed beholden to me for services rendered in the past. Mr. Burke, I make you a proposition--it is worth considering. Why not come with me? Wipe off old scores, throw in your lot with mine. Together, what could we not do--I with my experience, you with your youthful vigour! See, here is an earnest of my sincerity." He took from his fob a

large diamond, which flashed in the red light of the conflagration. "Accept this; in the treasuries of Alivirdi there are thousands like it, each worth a king's ransom. Come with me, and I promise you that within two years you shall be rich beyond your wildest dreams."

[#] Viceroy.

"Put up your diamond, Mr. Peloti. You may repeat your offer when we reach Colonel Clive."

Diggle stopped as if shot. He looked with startled eyes at the boy, who had known him only as Diggle.

"You are going to Colonel Clive!" he exclaimed. The smoothness of his manner was gone; his tone expressed mortal anxiety. "But--but--he is a personal enemy; he will--I beseech you think again; I----"

He broke off, and with a suddenness that took Desmond by surprise he sprang away, making towards the grove of mangoes that stood between him and the shore. Desmond was instantly in pursuit. If Diggle gained the shelter of the trees he might escape in the darkness. But the race was short. Weak from fear and loss of blood, the elder was no match in speed for the younger. In less than a hundred yards he was overtaken, and stood panting, quivering, unnerved. Desmond gripped his uninjured arm, and with quickened footsteps hurried him towards the shore. There was the boat, the lascar resting motionless on his oar. Ten minutes later Diggle was assisted up the side of the *Kent*, and handed over to the officer of the watch. Then Desmond made his report to Clive.

"All the enemy are withdrawn within the fort, sir. The whole ground between the fort and the shore is clear. There is nothing to obstruct your landing."

"I thank you. You have exceeded your time by ten minutes. Who is that man who came aboard with you?"

"It was he who delayed me, sir. It is Mr. Diggle, or Peloti, I should say."

"The deuce he is!"

"He was stealing out of the fort; it came to a scuffle, and he was wounded--so I brought him along."

"Mr. Speke," said Clive turning to the captain, "may I ask you to see this man safe bestowed? I will deal with him when our business here is concluded. Mr. Burke, you will come with me."

By nine o'clock Clive had landed his troops. They bivouacked on the shore, in expectation of storming the fort next day. At daybreak an officer was sent into the fort with a flag of truce to demand its surrender. This being refused, the

Admiral ordered his ships to warp within a cable's length of the walls in three fathoms and a quarter of water, and the attack was renewed by sea and land, Clive gradually advancing and worrying the enemy with his cannon. At two o'clock a magazine in the fort blew up, and not long after, just as Clive was about to give the order to storm, a white flag was seen fluttering at one of the bastions. A messenger was sent to the governor to arrange the capitulation, but when he was met by prevarication and pleas for delay the bombardment was once more resumed. A few minutes of this sufficed to bring the defenders to reason, and by five o'clock the English flag flew upon the walls.

Clive postponed his entry until dawn on the following morning.

"By Jove, Mr. Burke," he said to Desmond, who showed him the way to the palace, "if we had been within these walls I think we could have held out till doomsday."

All the English officers were impressed by the strength of the fortifications. Besides Angria's 250 cannon, an immense quantity of stores and ammunition fell into the hands of the captors. In the vaults of the palace were found silver rupees to the value of £100,000, and treasure worth £30,000 more. The capture had been effected with the loss of only twenty killed and wounded.

Desmond took the earliest opportunity of seeking the body of Fuzl Khan. Fortunately the fires and the noises of the night had preserved it from mangling by wild beasts. The poor man lay where he had fallen, near the body of the overseer.

"Poor fellow!" thought Desmond, looking at the strong, fierce face and the gigantic frame now stiff and cold. "Little he knew, when he said he'd serve me to his life's end, that the end was so near."

He had the body carried into the town, and reverently buried according to Mohammedan rites. From the lascar he had learnt all that he ever knew of the motives of the Gujarati's action. Desmond had hardly left the boat when the man sprang quickly after him, saying briefly: "I go to guard the sahib." It was like the instinctive impulse of a faithful dog; and Desmond often regretted the loss of the man who had shown himself so capable of devotion.

That evening Clive summoned Desmond to attend him in the palace. When he entered the durbar hall, he saw a small group seated on the dais, consisting of Clive, Admiral Watson, and two or three subordinate officers. Standing in front of them was Diggle, in the charge of two marines.

"How many European prisoners have been released, Mr. Ward?" the Admiral was saying.

"Thirteen, sir; ten English and three Dutch."

"Is that correct, Mr. Burke? Was that the number when you were here?"

"Yes, sir, that is correct."

"Then you may go, Mr. Ward, and see that the poor fellows are taken on

board the *Tyger* and well looked after." As the officer saluted and withdrew the Admiral turned to Clive.

"Now for this white pirate," he said: "a most unpleasant matter, truly."

Signing to the marines to bring forward their prisoner, he threw himself back upon the divan, leaving the matter in Clive's hands. Clive was gazing hard at Diggle, who had lost the look of terror he had worn two nights before, and stood before them in his usual attitude of careless ease.

"You captured this man," said Clive, turning to Desmond, "within the precincts of the fort?"

His hard level tone contrasted strongly with the urbaner manner of the Admiral.

"Yes, sir," replied Desmond.

"He is the same man who inveigled you on board the interloper *Good Intent* and delivered you to the Pirate?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he was to your knowledge associated with the Pirate, and offered you inducements to spy upon His Majesty's forces in Bombay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you anything to say for yourself, Mr. Peloti?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Clive; Diggle--Marmaduke Diggle."

"Diggle if you like," said Clive with a shrug. "You will hang as well in that name as another."

One of the officers smiled at the grim jest, but there was no smile on Clive's stern, set face.

"You asked me had I anything to say for myself," said Diggle quietly. "Assuredly; but it seems your honours have condemned me already. Why should I waste your time, and my breath? I bethink me 'twas not even in Rome the custom to judge a matter before learning the facts--'prius rem dijudicare'; but it is a long time, Mr. Clive, since we conned our Terence together."

Desmond could not but admire the superb insouciance and the easy smile with which Diggle played his card. Seeing that Clive for an instant hesitated, the intrepid prisoner continued:

"But there, Mr. Clive, you never excelled in the Latin. 'Twas a sore point with poor Mr. Burslem."

"Come, come," cried Clive, visibly nettled, "this is no time for quips. You fail to appreciate your position. You are caught red-handed. If you have no defence to make you will meet the fate of other pirates before you. Have you anything to say?"

"Yes. You accuse me of piracy; I have a complete answer to that charge; but as an Englishman I claim an Englishman's right--a fair trial before a jury of

my countrymen. In any case, Mr. Clive, it would be invidious to give me worse treatment than Monaji Angria and his officers. As for the rest, it depends on the evidence of this single witness."

Here Admiral Watson bent forward and said to Clive in an undertone, inaudible to the others:

"I think we had better defer this. If, as you suppose, the fellow has knowledge of the French plans, it would be only politic to give Mr. Bourchier an opportunity of inquiring into the matter. No doubt he richly deserves hanging, but *dead* men tell no tales."

Clive frowned, and, drumming upon the divan impatiently with his fingers, seemed for the moment to be lost in thought. Then he said:

"Yes, Mr. Watson, I think you are right."

"Take the prisoner back to your ship," said the Admiral, "and put him under double guard. Thank you, Mr. Burke; we shall require your evidence in Bombay. One word before you go. I am vastly indebted to you for your services; you have been of the greatest use to myself and my captains. Your name will frequently appear in our ships' logs, and I shall take care to show your work in the proper light when I make my report. Meanwhile, when the division of prize-money is made, you will receive a lieutenant's share. Good-night, sir."

And Desmond's face, as he left the room, bore a flush of happiness and pride.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH

In which the scene changes; the dramatis personæ remaining the same.

A few days after the capture, the *Tyger* left Gheria, having on board the men wounded in the attack and the European prisoners who had been rescued. Desmond also sailed in her, with an official report from Admiral Watson to Governor Bourchier.

The arrival of the *Tyger* at Bombay, with the first news of the success of the expedition and the fall of the fortress so long deemed impregnable, was the occasion of a great demonstration of rejoicing. The trading community, whether European or native, was enthusiastic over the ruin of the notorious Pirate; and Desmond, as one who had had a share in the operations, came in for a good deal

of congratulation which he laughingly protested ought to have been reserved for better men.

Mr. Merriman was among the crowd that welcomed the *Tyger*, and as soon as Desmond had delivered his report to Mr. Bourchier, the genial merchant carried him off to the house on the Green where he was staying and insisted on having a full account of his experiences. When he learnt that Diggle had been captured and would shortly reach Bombay as a prisoner, his jolly face assumed as intense a look of vindictive satisfaction as it was capable of expressing.

"By thunder! that's the best of your news for me. The villain will get his deserts at last. I'm only sorry that I shall not be here to serve on the jury."

"Are you leaving Bombay then?"

"Yes, and I wanted you to come with me. My ship the *Hormuzzeer* came to port two days ago, and I had to dismiss the second mate, who was continually at odds with the lascars. I hoped you would accept his berth, and sail with me. I want to get back to Calcutta. We had advices the other day that things are not looking well in Bengal. Alivirdi Khan is dying; and there is sure to be some bother about the succession. All Bengal may be aflame. My wife and daughter are in Calcutta, and I don't care about being away from them if danger is threatening. I want to get away as soon as possible, and thought of taking passage in an Indiaman; but the *Hormuzzeer* being here I'll sail in that; she'll make direct for the Hugli; an Indiaman would put in at Madras, and goodness knows how long I might be delayed."

"'Tis a pity," said Desmond. "I should have liked of all things to accept your offer, but I'm bound to stay for Diggle's trial, and that can't be held until the fleet return."

"How long will that be?"

"I heard the Admiral say he expected it would take a month to settle everything at Gheria. He wants to keep the place in our hands, but Ramaji Punt claims it for the Peshwa, and Captain Speke of the *Kent* told me that it'll be very lucky if they come to an arrangement within a month."

"It's uncommonly vexatious. I can't wait a month. It'll take a week or more to clean the *Hormuzzeer's* hull, and another to load her; in a fortnight at the outside I hope to be on my way. Well, it can't be helped. What will you do when the trial is over?"

"I don't know."

"Did Mr. Clive say anything about a cadetship?"

"Not a word. He only said that I should get a share of the Gheria prize-money."

"That's something to the good. Use it wisely. I came out to Calcutta twenty years ago with next to nothing, and I've done well. There's no reason why you

should not make your fortune too if your health will stand the climate. We'll have a talk over things before I sail."

A week later the *Bridgewater* arrived from Gheria, with Diggle on board. He was imprisoned in the Fort, being allotted far too comfortable quarters to please Mr. Merriman. But Merriman's indignation at what he considered the Governor's leniency was changed to hot rage three days later when it became known that the prisoner had disappeared. Not a trace of him could be discovered. He had been locked in as usual one night, and next morning his room was empty. Imprisonment was much less stringent in those days than now; the prisoner was allowed to see visitors and to live more or less at ease. The only clue to Diggle's escape was afforded by the discovery that, at the same time that he disappeared, there vanished also a black boy, who had been brought among the prisoners from Gheria and was employed in doing odd jobs about the harbour. Desmond had no doubt that this was Diggle's boy Scipio Africanus. And when he mentioned the connexion between the two, it was supposed that the negro had acted as go-between for his master with the friends in the town by whose aid the escape had been arranged. Among the large native population of Bombay there were many who were suspected of being secret agents of the French, and as Diggle was well provided with funds it was not at all unlikely that his jailer had been tampered with. Merriman's wrath was very bitter. He had been waiting for years, as he told Desmond, for the punishment of Peloti. It was gall and wormwood to him that the villain should have cheated the gallows.

Diggle's escape, however, gave Merriman an opportunity to secure Desmond's services. The culprit being gone, the evidence was no longer required. Finding that Desmond was still ready to accept the position of mate on the *Hormuzzeer*, Merriman consulted Mr. Bourchier, who admitted that he saw no reason for detaining the lad. Accordingly, at the end of the first week in March, when the vessel stood out of Bombay harbour, Desmond sailed with her.

The weather was calm, but the winds not wholly favourable, and the *Hormuzzeer* made a somewhat slow passage. Mr. Merriman was impatient to reach Calcutta, and Desmond was surprised at his increasing uneasiness. He had believed that the French and Dutch were the only people in Bengal who gave the Company trouble, and as England was then at peace with both France and the Netherlands, there was nothing, he thought, to fear from them.

"You are mistaken," said Mr. Merriman, in the course of a conversation one day. "The natives are a terrible thorn in our side. At best we are in Bengal on sufferance; we are a very small community--only a hundred or two Europeans in Calcutta: and since the Marathas overran the country some years ago we have felt as though sitting on the brink of a volcano. Alivirdi wants to keep us down; he has forbidden us to fight the French even if war does break out between us

at home; and though the Mogul has granted us charters--they call them firmans here--Alivirdi doesn't care a rap for things of that sort, and won't be satisfied until he has us under his heel. Only his trading profits and his fear of the Mogul have kept him civil."

"But you said he was dying."

"So he is, and that makes matters worse, for his grandson, Siraj-uddaula, who'll probably succeed him, is no better than a tiger. He lives at Murshidabad, about 100 miles up the river. He's a vain, peacocky, empty-headed youth, and as soon as the breath is out of his grandad's body he'll want to try his wings and take a peck or two at us. He may do it slyly, or go so far as to attack us openly."

"But if he did that, sure Calcutta is defended; and, as Mr. Clive said to me in Gheria, British soldiers behind walls might hold out for ever."

"Clive doesn't know Calcutta then! That's the mischief! At the Maratha invasion the Bengalis on our territory took fright, and at their own expense began a great ditch round Calcutta--we call it the Maratha ditch; but the Nawab bought the Marathas off, the work was stopped, the walls of the fort are now crumbling to ruins, and the cannon lie about unmounted and useless. Worst of all, our governor, Mr. Drake, is a quiet soul, an excellent worthy man, who wouldn't hurt a fly. We call him the Quaker. Quakers are all very well at home, where they can 'thee' and 'thou' and get rich and pocket affronts without any harm; but they won't do in India. Might is right with the natives; they don't understand anything else; and as sure as they see any sign of weakness in us they'll take advantage of it and send us all to kingdom come. And I'm thinking of the women folk: India's no place for them at the best; and I did all I could to persuade my wife and daughter to remain at home. But they would come out with me when I returned last year; and glad as I am to have them with me I sometimes get very anxious; I can't bear them out of my sight, and that's a fact."

Mr. Merriman showed his relief when, on the 30th of April, he noticed the yellow tinge in the water which indicated that the vessel was approaching the mouth of the Hugli. Next day the vessel arrived at Balasore, where a pilot was taken on board, and entered the river. Mr. Merriman pointed out to Desmond the island of Sagar, whither in the late autumn the jogis came down in crowds to purify themselves in the salt water, "and provide a meal for the tigers," he added. At Kalpi a large barge, rowed by a number of men dressed in white, with pink sashes, came to meet the *Hormuzzeer*.

"That's my budgero," said Merriman. "We'll get into it and row up to Calcutta in half the time it would take the ship. Each of us merchants has his own budgero, and instead of putting our men in buttons with our arms and all that nonsense, we give them coloured sashes--and don't our women squabble about the colours, my boy, just don't they!"

In the budgero they passed the Dutch factory at Fulta, and the Subah's forts at Budge Budge and Tanna. At Gobindpur's reach, Merriman pointed out the pyramid of stone that marked the limit of the Company's jurisdiction. Soon the gardens of the British merchants came in sight, then the Company's docks, and at last the town of Calcutta, where the Company's landing-stage was thronged with people awaiting the arrival of the budgero in the hope of getting news from home.

"There's Surendra Nath and his father," said Mr. Merriman, as they came near the steps. His jolly face beamed when he stepped on to the ghat.[#] "Hullo, Babu!" he said. "Glad to see you again." He shook hands with both the men; the elder was much like his son, a slightly-built Bengali, with white hair and very bright eyes. Both were clad in dhotis of pure white; their legs were bare from the knee, their feet shod with sandals. When the greeting had passed between them and their master, the old man moved towards Desmond, put his hands together, and made a deep salaam.

[#] Landing-stage.

"I have heard what the sahib did for my son. I thank the sahib," he said.

"Yes, 'twas excellent good fortune for Surendra Nath," said Mr. Merriman. "I knew you would be overjoyed to see your son again. But how is the bibi,[#] and the chota[#] bibi?"

[#] Lady: *mem-sahib* was not yet in use.
[#] Young.

"They were well, sahib, when last I heard. They are on a visit to Watts Sahib, at Cossimbazar."

Merriman's face fell, but he had no time to say more, for he was accosted by a friend.

"Glad to see you back, Mr. Merriman. I've wanted your voice on the Council for some time past."

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Holwell?" asked Merriman anxiously.

"Everything is wrong. Alivirdi died a fortnight ago; Siraj-uddaula has stepped into his shoes; and Drake has made a mess of everything, with Manningham's and Frankland's assistance. I want you to come and dine with me this

evening; we must have a serious talk; I've asked two or three men of our sort in anticipation of your consent."

"Very well. Let me present my friend Mr. Burke. He escaped from Gheria; you've heard that Colonel Clive captured the place?"

"Yes; we had despatches from Admiral Watson some days ago. I have heard of Mr. Burke's adventures; your servant, sir; I am delighted to meet you. Well, Merriman, three o'clock; I will not detain you now; you'll want to get home."

Mr. Merriman's bearers were at hand with his palanquin; he got into it; the men set off at a swinging pace, warning the bystanders with their cry of "Tok! Tok!" and Desmond walked by the side of the chair, amused to watch the self-important airs of the peon who went in front. They passed the Fort and the Company's house, and arrived at length at a two-storey flat-roofed house with a veranda, the windows filled, not with oyster shells as at Bombay, but with thin screens of reeds.

"Here we are," said Merriman with a sigh of relief "Now I'll hand you over to the baniya[#]; he'll show you to your room. I'm vexed that my wife is not here; of course she didn't know when to expect me; and Mrs. Watts is an old friend of hers. 'Tis a relief in one way; for Mr. Watts is a shrewd fellow--he's head of our factory at Cossimbazar, and senior member of Council here--and he would have sent the ladies away if he scented danger. Sorry I shall have to leave you; I must dine with Mr. Holwell; he's our zamindar--judge of the Cutcheri court and collector of taxes: a fine fellow, the most cool-headed man on the Council. But the khansaman will give you something to eat: and I'll be back as soon as I can. You can take it easy on the veranda, and you'll find a hookah if you care to try it."

[#] Factotum.

"No, thanks," said Desmond with a smile; "I've no fancy that way."

Shortly afterwards Mr. Merriman left the house in his palanquin, wearing the short white calico jacket that was then *de rigueur* at dinner parties. It was late before he returned. There was an anxious and worried look on his face, but he said cheerily:

"Well, how have you been getting on?"

"I've been reading, sir: I found a volume of Mr. Fielding's *Amelia*, and 'twas a change to read after eighteen months without setting eyes on a book. I hope you had a good dinner."

"'Pon my soul I don't know. None of us know. I warrant. We had too much to talk about to think about our appetites. Two or three members of Council were

there, and Captain Minchin, the military commandant. Things are looking black, Desmond. Alivirdi is dead, and, as I expected, his scoundrel of a grandson, Siraj-uddaula, is the new Subah. He has imprisoned one of his rivals, his aunt, and is marching against another, his cousin Shaukat Jung; and 'tis the common talk that our turn will come next."

"But why should he be at odds with us?"

"Why, to begin with, he's a native and hates us; thinks we're too rich; and though he's rich enough he would like to get what we have and turn us out. Then our president Mr. Drake has acted in the weakest possible way; the very way to encourage the Subah. Instead of siding with Siraj-uddaula from the first, as he might well have done, because the rivals never had the ghost of a chance, he shilly-shallied. Then he offended him by giving shelter to a fellow named Krishna Das, who came in a month ago with fifty sacks of treasure from Murshidabad; it really belonged to the Subah's aunt, but the Subah had an eye on it and he's furious at losing it. That wasn't enough. Mr. Watts at Cossimbazar had warned the Council here of the new Subah's unfriendliness; they talk at Murshidabad of our weak defences and how easy it would be to overcome us. He advised Mr. Drake to keep on good terms with the Subah; but what must he do but turn out of the place a man named Narayan Das, the brother of the new Nawab's chief spy."

"Sure you don't allow the enemy's spies to live in Calcutta?"

"Sure we can't help ourselves. The place is full of them--spies of the Subah, and of the French too. We can't do anything. We may suspect, but if we raised a hand we should stir up a hornets' nest, as indeed Mr. Drake appears to be doing. But that isn't all. The Company's ship *Delaware* came in a fortnight ago with the news that a French fleet is fitting out under Count Lally, at Brest; 'tis supposed war will break out again and the fleet is intended to attack us here. So that we may have the Subah making common cause with the French to crush us. He'll turn against the French then, but that won't save us. On top of that comes a fakir from Murshidabad demanding in the Subah's name that we should stop work on our fortifications; the insolence of the wretch passes all bounds. Mr. Drake properly refused the demand; he said we were repairing our defences in case we needed 'em against the French; but he undertook not to start any new works, which was a mistake. Altogether, Desmond, things are in a pretty mess. I'm afraid Mr. Drake is not the man to cope with a grave situation; but he has the majority of the Council with him, and we can't alter it. Now I think we had better turn in; perhaps I shall feel better after a good sleep; I am certainly far from easy in mind."

Desmond slept like a top on his light mattress, enveloped in his mosquito curtains. In the morning he accompanied Mr. Merriman to his daftarkhanah,[#] where he found a large staff under the superintendence of the muhri,[#] Surendra Nath's father. He returned to the house for tiffin, spent the afternoon indoors

over his novel, and after the three o'clock dinner accompanied his host in a walk through the English quarter.

[#] Office.
[#] Chief clerk.

As they returned, Mr. Merriman suggested that they should walk down to Mr. Watts' house near the river to see if any news had arrived from Cossimbazar. On the way they passed a large pakka[#] house, surrounded by a compound and a low wall.

[#] Substantial.

"We were talking yesterday about spies," said Merriman. "In that house lives a man who in my belief is a spy, and a treacherous scoundrel--actually living next door to Mr. Eyre, the keeper of our military stores. He's a Sikh named Omichand, and the richest merchant in the city. He owns half of it; he's my landlord, confound him! For forty years he was the contractor for supplying the Company with cloth, but we found out that he was cheating us right and left, and dismissed him. Yet he's very friendly to us, which is a bad sign. 'Twas he who brought Krishna Das with his treasure into the place, and my belief is, he did it merely to embroil us with the Subah. Mr. Drake is disposed to pooh-pooh the idea, but I incline to Mr. Holwell's opinion, that Omichand's a schemer and a villain, ready to betray us to French, Dutch, or Gentoos as it suits him."

"Why don't you turn him out, then?" asked Desmond.

"My dear boy, he's far too powerful. And we'd rather keep him in sight. While he's here we can tell something of what is going on; his house is pretty well watched; but if he were away he might try all manner of tricks and we should never learn anything about them. Our policy is to be very sweet to him--to make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, as Mr. Bellamy, our padre, puts it. You're bound to see him one of these days, the hoary-headed old villain."

Though Mr. Merriman fully relied on Mr. Watts' discretion to send his visitors back to Calcutta if there were the least sign of danger, he was so anxious to have his wife and daughter with him that next day he sent a special messenger up the river asking them to return as soon as they could. He could not fetch them, public affairs not allowing him to leave Calcutta at once, but he promised to meet

them somewhere on the way. He spent the day in making himself acquainted with the business that had been done during his absence. A valuable consignment of silks, muslins, and taffeties was expected from Cossimbazar, he learnt, and as soon as it arrived the *Hormuzzeer* would be able to sail for Penang.

"A private venture," he said to Desmond, "nothing to do with the Company."

Desmond expressed his surprise that the Company's officials were at liberty to engage in private trading.

"Why, bless you, how could we live otherwise? Do you imagine I got rich on the Company? What do you suppose my salary is as member of Council? 'Tis just forty pounds. The factors get fifteen and the writers five: Colonel Clive began at five pounds a year: so you may guess that we have to do something to keep flesh on our bones. And that reminds me of a proposal I wished to make to you. You have a little money from the sale of the Pirate's grab, and you'll have more by and by when the Gheria prize-money is distributed. Why not put some of it into the *Hormuzzeer*? Let me buy some goods for you, and send 'em to Penang: they'll fetch top prices there in the present state of trade. 'Twill be an excellent investment."

"Thank you, sir, I'll be glad to follow your advice."

"That's right. I'll see about it at once, and the sooner these things come from Cossimbazar the better. The delay is vexing, and I fear I'll have to change my agent there."

Mr. Merriman being so much occupied with business and public affairs, Desmond had much time to himself. He soon made friends among the junior merchants and factors, and in their company went about Calcutta. Fort William was built near the river, the factory house in the centre of the enclosure. Around it on three sides were the houses of individual merchants and officers. A wide avenue known as the Lai Bazar led from the ravelin of the fort past the court-house to the native part of the town. On one side of the avenue was the Park or Lai Bagh, with a great tank by which a band played in the evening. Around the town was the incomplete Maratha ditch.

Desmond became the object of much kindly attention from the Company's servants and their families. Every one was eager to hear from his own lips the story of his adventures, and invitations to dinners and routs and card parties poured upon him. He accepted a few and politely excused himself from the rest, not from any want of sociability, but from motives of prudence. His kind host had already given him a friendly warning; some of the writers and younger servants of the Company were wild spirits, and spent more time than was good for them in cards and revels.

On the evening of the third day after landing he went down to the river to watch the arrival of some country vessels. There was the usual crowd at the ghat,

and as Desmond gradually worked his way through it he suddenly saw, just in front of him, two men whose backs were very familiar. They were in the dress of seamen: one was tall and thin, the other broad and brawny, and Desmond did not need his glimpse of the iron hook to be sure that the men were none other than his old friend Bulger and Mr. Toley, the melancholy mate. They were standing side by side, watching in silence the arrival of the boats.

Desmond edged his way to them until he was within arm's length of Bulger's hook. He stood for a moment looking at them, imagining their surprise when they saw him, wondering if their pleasure would be as keen as his own. Both appeared rather battered; Mr. Toley's expression was never merry, and he was neither more nor less melancholy than usual; but Bulger's habitual cheerfulness seemed to have left him; his air was moody and downcast. How came they here? The *Good Intent* being an interloper, it was not at all likely that she had ventured to put in at Calcutta.

By and by Bulger seemed to become aware that some one was gazing at him, for he turned round slowly. Desmond could not but smile at his extraordinary change of expression. His first look of blank amazement quickly gave place to one of almost boyish delight, and taking an eager step forward he exclaimed:

"By thunder, 'tis Mr. Burke or his ghost! Bless my heart! Ho! shake hands, matey; this is a sight for sad eyes!"

"Glad to see you, Bulger," said Desmond quietly; "and you too, Mr. Toley."

Mr. Toley had shown no surprise; but then, nothing ever surprised Mr. Toley.

"Sure I'm rejoiced," he said. "We had given you up for lost."

His hearty hand-grip was more convincing than his words, though, indeed, Desmond had good reason to know the real kindliness that always lay behind his outward solemnity of manner.

"You're better in togs than when I seed you last, sir," said Bulger, gripping his hand again. "Which you look quite the gentleman; got a berth as supercargo, sir?"

"Not yet, Bulger," replied Desmond, laughing. "How's Captain Barker?"

Bulger spat out a quid of tobacco and hitched up his breeches.

"I don't know how Captain Barker is, and what's more, I don't care," he said. "Me and Barker en't friends: leastways, not on speakin' terms; which I will say, hang Captain Barker, topsy-versy, any way you like; and I don't care who hears me."

"What has happened?"

"Happened! Why, sir, Mr. Toley'll tell you what happened. He knows the thus, therefore, and whereupon of it."

The good fellow was itching to tell, but in duty bound deferred to his supe-

rior officer.

"Go on, Bulger," said the American, "you've got a looser tongue than me."

"Which I don't deny, sir. Two days ago--'twas at Chandernagore, where the *Good Intent's* been laid up for a matter o' weeks--the captain he went an' forgot hisself, sir; clean forgot hisself, an' lifted his hand to Mr. Toley; ay, hit him, sir. Wunst it was, sir, on'y wunst; then 'twas Mr. Toley his turn. Ah, an' I warrant Captain Barker's in his bunk to-day. Never did I see sich a sight all the years I've been afloat, an' that's sayin' something. There was captain spread out on deck, sir, with his eyes bunged up an' a tooth or two that had lost their bearin's, and all his bones wonderin' if they was ever goin' to get joined again. That's the why and wherefore of it, sir. Well, in course, 'twas no kiss-an'-be-friends arter that; so, bein' in a mounseer's place, Mr. Toley took French leave, which I did the same, and here we are a-lookin' for a job.

"But Lor' bless me! what's happened to you, Mr. Burke? When you didn't come aboard at that there Gheria, Captain Barker he says, 'Log that there knave Burke a deserter,' says he. But I says to Mr. Toley, 'I may be wrong, sir,' says I, 'but I lay my whiskers that Diggle has been an' sold him to the Pirate, an' that's the last we shall ever see of as nice a young fellow as ever hauled on a hawser.' How did you get out of the Pirate's den, sir?"

"That's a long story, Bulger. I'll tell you all in good time. You're looking for a job, are you? Well, I happen to know of a skipper here--a good man: maybe he'll have a berth for a seasoned salt like you. I'll present you to him, and I know he'll do what he can for you."

Before he left the men, Desmond took Mr. Toley aside.

"Mr. Toley," he said, "my friend Mr. Merriman wants a mate for one of his vessels, as I happen to know. You would be willing to sign on?"

"I would, sir. I'm a man of few words."

"Very well; come up to Mr. Merriman's house by the Rope Walk and we'll see what he says."

That same day Mr. Merriman invited the American to dinner, and engaged him, to Desmond's surprise, as first mate for the *Hormuzzeer*, with Bulger as bo'sun.

"Don't look so blue," he said to Desmond when Mr. Toley had gone. "He will, of course, take your place. The fact is, I've taken a fancy to you, and I think you can do better than by serving as mate on a country vessel. Look in at the daftarkhanah sometimes, and get Surendra Nath to explain something of our business methods."

He said no more at that time, and Desmond felt no little curiosity about his host's intentions.

One evening Desmond was sitting alone on the veranda, reading, awaiting Mr. Merriman's return from a meeting of the Council to which he had been hastily

summoned. Hearing a footstep he looked up, and was surprised to see, instead of Mr. Merriman, as he expected, Bulger hastening up with an air of excitement.

"Mr. Burke, sir, what d'you think I've seed? I could hardly believe my own eyes. I was walkin' down towards the fort when I seed two men goin' into a big house. They was Englishmen, leastways white men, and I may be wrong, but I bet my boots one on 'em was that there soft-speakin' villain Diggle."

"Diggle!" exclaimed Desmond, springing up. "You must be mistaken, Bulger."

"I may be wrong, sir, but I never remembers any time when I was."

"What house did he go into?"

"That I can't tell you, sir, not bein' sure o' my bearin's."

"But you could point it out?"

"'Course I could. Rather. Just so."

"Then I'll come along with you, and you can show me. If it is Diggle we must have him arrested."

"True, an' I'll knot the rope for his neck."

"How long ago was this?"

"Not a quarter of an hour, sir. I comed up at once."

The two set off together. They quickly reached the house; Desmond recognized it as Omichand's. The evening was closing in, but no lights were visible through the chiks[#] that covered the windows. While Desmond was considering, two figures stepped down from the veranda and walked rapidly across the compound towards the gate in the wall. At the first glance Desmond saw that Bulger had not been mistaken. The taller of the two figures was disguised, but it was impassible to mistake the gloved right hand. It was Diggle to a certainty.

[#] Hanging screens made of thin strips of bamboo.

"Are you game to capture them?" said Desmond.

Bulger grunted and gave a twist to his hook.

"I'll take Diggle," added Desmond: "you go for the other man."

They waited in the shadow of the wall. The gate opened, the two men came out, and in an instant Desmond and his companion dashed forward. Taken by surprise, the men had no time to defend themselves. With his left hand Desmond caught at Diggle's sword-arm, and pointing his rapier at his heart, said:

"You are my prisoner, Mr. Diggle."

At the same moment Bulger had caught the second man by the throat, and raising his formidable hook, cried:

"Heave to, matey, or I'll spoil your mug for you."

The man uttered an exclamation in French, which ended in a wheeze as Bulger's strong fingers clutched his windpipe. But the next moment an unlooked-for diversion occurred. Attracted by the sound of the rapid scuffle, a number of natives armed with lathis[#] rushed across the compound into the street, and came swiftly to the rescue. Desmond and his companion had perforce to release their prisoners and turn to defend themselves. With their backs against the wall they met the assailants; Desmond with his rapier, Bulger with his hook, dexterously warding off the furious blows of the excited natives. Diggle and the Frenchman took instant advantage of the opportunity to slip away, and the Englishmen had already got home more than one shrewd thrust, provoking yells of pain from the attackers, when the onslaught suddenly ceased, and the natives stood rigid, as if under a spell. Looking round, Desmond saw at the gate a bent old figure with dusky wrinkled face and prominent eyes. He wore a turban in which a jewel sparkled, and his white garment was girt with a yellow sash.

[#] Bludgeons.

"What is this, sahib?" he said severely in careful English, addressing Desmond.

"'Tis pretty plain what it is," said Desmond somewhat hotly; "we have been set upon by these six ruffians----"

The new-comer motioned with his hand, and the men slunk away.

"I regret, sahib. The men are badmashes; Calcutta is unhappily in a disturbed state."

"Badmashes or not, they came from your house--if this is your house."

"It is my house, sahib. My name is Omichand. I must inquire how the badmashes came to be in my compound. I fear my darwan is at fault."

"And what about the two men?"

"The two men, sahib?"

"Yes, the two Europeans who came first from the house, and were protected by these ruffians?"

"You must be mistaken, sahib. English sahibs do not visit at the houses of Indian gentlemen. If the sahib had been longer in Calcutta he would know that."

A smile flickered on the Indian's face, but it was gone instantly. Desmond was nonplussed. It was useless to contradict the merchant; he was clearly not disposed to give any information; Diggle was gone. All he could do was to return and report the matter to Mr. Merriman.

"Come along, Bulger," he said, with an unceremonious gesture to Omichand.

"We can do no good here."

"The old Ananias!" growled Bulger, as they walked away. "What in thunder is Diggle's game here? I'd give a year's baccy to have a chanst o' usin' my hook on him."

Mr. Merriman looked grave when he heard what had happened.

"To think of that villain once more escaping our clutches! The other fellow was a Frenchman, you say? There's mischief brewing. Sure if I was president I'd be tempted to arrest that wily old Omichand. Not that it would be of much use probably. Peloti is a bold fellow to venture here. You are sure 'twas he?"

"Absolutely. His disguise was good; he has altered his face in some way, and his dress is altogether changed; but I couldn't mistake the covered hand."

"'Tis an odd thing, that mitten. Probably it conceals some defect; the man's as vain as a peacock. The mitten is a thing by which he may be traced, and I'll send my peons to start inquiries to-morrow. But I've something to say to you; something to propose. The *Hormuzzeer* is ready to sail, save for that consignment at Cossimbazar I mentioned. My agent there is an Armenian named Coja Solomon; I've employed him for some years and found him trustworthy; but I can't get delivery of these goods. I've sent two or three messengers to him, asking him to hurry, but he replies that there is some difficulty about the dastaks--papers authorizing the despatch of goods free from customs duty. Now, will you go up the river and see what is causing the delay? I'll give you an introduction to Mr. Watts; he will do all he can for you, though no doubt his hands are full. You can take Surendra Nath with you to interpret; and you had better have some armed peons as an escort, and perhaps a number of men we can trust to work the boats if you can release the goods. Are you willing?"

"I will gladly do anything I can, sir. Indeed, I wished for an opportunity to see something of the country."

"You may see too much! I'd say beware of tigers, but Surendra Nath is so desperately timid that you can depend on him not to lead you into danger."

"The *Hormuzzeer* will not sail until I return?"

"Not till the goods arrive. Why do you ask?"

"I should like to take Bulger with me. He's a good companion, with a shrewd head----"

"And a useful hook. I have no objection. You will be ready to start to-morrow, then. You must be up early: travelling will be impossible in the heat of the day."

"At dawn, sir."

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

In which there are recognitions and explanations; and our hero meets one Coja Solomon, of Cossimbazar

At sunrise next morning Desmond found his party awaiting him at the Causeway beyond the Maratha ditch. The natives salaamed when he came up in company with Mr. Merriman, and Bulger pulled his forelock.

"Mornin,' sir; mornin'; I may be wrong, but 'tis my belief we're goin' to have a bilin' hot day, and I've come accordin'."

He was clad in nothing but shirt and breeches, with his coat strapped to his back, and a hat apparently improvised out of cabbage leaves. The natives were all in white, with their employer's pink ribands. Some were armed with matchlocks and pikes; others carried light cooking utensils; others groceries for the Englishmen's use; for their own food they depended on the villages through which they would pass.

"Well, I wish you a good journey," said Mr. Merriman, who appeared to be in better spirits than for many a day. "I'm glad to tell you, Burke, that I got a letter from Mr. Watts this morning, saying that my wife and daughter are on their way down the river with Mrs. Watts and her children. They've got Mr. Warren Hastings to escort them; trust 'em to find a handsome man! The road follows the river, and if you look out I dare say you will see them. You'll recognize our livery. Introduce yourself if you meet 'em. You have your letter for Mr. Watts? That's all right. Good-bye, and good luck to you."

The party set off. The old road by which they were to travel ran at a short distance from the left bank of the Hugli, passing through an undulating country, interspersed with patches of low wood and scattered trees. The scenery was full of charm for Desmond: the rich vegetation; antelopes darting among the trees; flamingoes and pelicans standing motionless at the edge of the slow-gliding stream; white-clad figures coming down the broad steps of the riverside ghats to bathe; occasionally the dusky corpse of some devotee consigned by his relations to the bosom of the holy river.

The first halt was called at Barrakpur, where, amid a luxuriant grove of palms and bamboos, stood some beautiful pagodas, built of the unburnt brick of the country, and faced with a fine stucco that gleamed in the sunlight like polished marble. Here, under the shade of the palms, Desmond lay through the hot afternoon, watching the boats of all shapes and sizes that floated lazily down the broad-bosomed stream. In the evening the march was resumed, the party crossed the river by a ford at Pulta Ghat, and following the road on the other bank came at sundown to the outskirts of the French settlement at Chandernagore. There they camped for the night. Desmond was for some time tormented by the doleful yells of packs of jackals roaming abroad in search of food. Their cries so much resembled those of human beings in dire agony that he shivered on his mattress; but falling asleep at length, he slept soundly and woke with the dawn.

He started again soon after sunrise. Just beyond Chandernagore Bulger pointed out the stripped spars of the *Good Intent*, lying far up a narrow creek.

"Wouldn't I just like to cut her out?" said Bulger. "But 'spose we can't stop for that, sir?"

"Certainly not. And you'd have the French about our ears."

Passing the Dutch settlement at Chinsura, he came into a country of paddy fields, now bare, broken by numerous nullahs worn by the torrents in the rainy season, but now nearly dry. Here and there the party had to ford a jhil,--an extensive shallow lake formed by the rains. Desmond tried a shot or two at the flights of teal that floated on these ponds; but they were so wild that he could never approach within range. Towards evening, after passing the little village of Amboa, they came to a grove of peepuls filled with green parrots and monkeys screaming and jabbering as though engaged in a competition. A few miles farther on they arrived at the larger village of Khulna, where they tied up for the night.

Next morning Desmond was wakened by Surendra Nath.

"Sahib," he said, "the bibi and the chota bibi are here."

"Mrs. Merriman?"

"Yes. They arrived last night by boat, and are pursuing their journey to-day."

"I should like to see them before they go. But I'm afraid I am hardly presentable."

"Believe me, sahib, you will not offend the bibi's punctilio."

"Well, send one of the peons to say that I shall have the pleasure of waiting on Mrs. Merriman in half an hour, if she will permit me."

Having shaved and bathed, and donned a change of clothes, Desmond set off accompanied by Surendra Nath to visit the ladies. He found them on a long shallow boat, in a cabin constructed of laths and mats filling one end of the light craft. The Babu made the introduction, then effaced himself. A lady, whose voice seemed to waken an echo in Desmond's memory, said:

"How do you do, Mr. Burke? I have heard of you in my husband's letters. Is the dear man well?"

"He is in good health, ma'am, but somewhat anxious to have you back again."

"Dear man! What is he anxious about? Mr. Watts seemed anxious also to get rid of us. He was vexed that Mrs. Watts is too much indisposed to accompany us. And Mr. Warren Hastings, who was to escort us, was quite angry because he had to go to one of the out-factories instead. I do not understand why these gentlemen are so much disturbed."

Desmond saw that Mrs. Merriman had been deliberately kept in ignorance of the grounds of the Englishmen's anxiety, and was seeking on the spur of the moment for a means to divert her from the subject, when he was spared the necessity. Miss Merriman had been looking at him curiously, and she now turned to her mother and said something in a tone inaudible to Desmond.

"La! you don't say so, my dear," exclaimed the lady. "Why, Mr. Burke, my daughter tells me that we have met you before."

His vague recollection of Mrs. Merriman's voice being thus so suddenly confirmed, he recalled, as from a far distant past, a scene upon Hounslow Heath; a coach that stood perilously near the ditch, a girl at the horses' heads, a lady stamping her foot at two servants wrestling in drunken stupidity on the ground.

"You never gave us an opportunity of thanking you," continued Mrs. Merriman. "'Twas not kind of you, Mr. Burke, to slip away thus without a word after doing two poor lone women such a service."

"Indeed, ma'am, 'twas with no discourteous intention, but seeing you were safe with your friends I--I--in short, ma'am----"

Desmond stopped in confusion, at a loss for a satisfactory explanation. The ladies were smiling.

"You thought to flee our acknowledgments," said Mrs. Merriman. "La, la, I know; I have a young brother of my own. But you shall not escape them now, and what is more, I shall see that Merriman, poor man, adds his, for I am sure he has forgiven you your exploit."

The younger lady laughed outright, while Desmond looked from one to the other. What did they mean?

"Indeed, ma'am," he said, "I had no idea----"

"That there was need for forgiveness?" said the lady, taking him up. "But indeed there was--eh, Phyllis? Mr. Burke," she added, with a sudden solemnity, "a few minutes after you left us at Soho Square Merriman rode up, and I assure you I nearly swooned, poor man! and hardly had strength to send for the surgeon. It needed three stitches--and he such a handsome man, too."

A horrid suspicion flashed through Desmond's mind. He remembered the scar on Mr. Merriman's brow, and that it was a scarcely healed wound when he

met him with Clive on that unfortunate occasion in Billiter Street.

"Surely, ma'am, you don't mean--the highwayman?"

"Indeed I do. That is just it. Your highwayman was--Mr. Merriman. Fancy the hurt to his feelings, to say nothing of his good looks. Fie, fie, Mr. Burke!"

For a moment Desmond did not know whether embarrassment or amazement was uppermost with him. It was bad enough to have tripped Mr. Merriman up in the muddy street; but to have also dealt him a blow of which he would retain the mark to his dying day--"This is terrible!" he thought. Still there was an element of absurdity in the adventure that appealed to his sense of the ridiculous. But he felt the propriety of being apologetic, and was about to express his regret for his mistake when Mrs. Merriman interrupted him with a smile:

"But there, Mr. Burke, he bears you no grudge, I am sure. He is the essence of good temper. It was a mistake; he saw that when I explained; and when he had vented his spleen on the coachman next day he owned that it was a plucky deed in you to take charge of us, and indeed he said that you was a mighty good whip; although," she added laughing, "you was a trifle heavy in hand."

Desmond felt bound to make a full confession. He related the incident of his encounter with Merriman in London--how he had toppled him over in the mud--wondering how the ladies would take it. He was relieved when they received his story with a peal of laughter.

"Oh, mamma; and it was his new frock!" said Phyllis.

"La, so it was, just fresh from Mr. Small's in Wigmore Street--forty guineas and no less!"

"Well ma'am, I'm already forgiven for that; I trust that with your good favour my earlier indiscretion will be forgiven."

"Indeed it shall be, Mr. Burke, I promise you. Now tell me: what brings you here?"

Desmond explained his errand in a few words. The ladies wished him a prosperous journey, and said they would hope to see him in a few days on his return. He left them, feeling that he had gained friends, and with a new motive, of which he was only vaguely conscious, to a speedy accomplishment of his business.

On the evening of the sixth day after leaving Calcutta there came into sight a church of considerable size, which Surendra Nath explained was the temple of the Armenian colony of Cossimbazar. Passing this, and leaving a maze of native dwellings and the French factory on the left, the travellers reached the Dutch factory, and beyond this the English settlement and fort. Leaving the Babu to arrange quarters for the peons in the native part of the town, Desmond hastened on past the stables and the hospital to the factory. It was a rough oblong in shape, defended at each corner by a bastion mounted with ten guns, the bastions being connected by massive curtains. In the south curtain, windowed for the greater

part of its length, was the gateway. Desmond was admitted by a native servant, and in a few minutes found himself in the presence of the chief, Mr. William Watts.

Mr. Watts was a tall man of near forty years--of striking presence, with firm chin, pleasant mouth, and eyes of peculiar depth and brilliance. He was clad in a long purple laced coat, with ruffles at the wrists and a high stock, and wore the short curled wig of the period. He welcomed Desmond with great cordiality, and, glancing over Mr. Merriman's letter, said:

"My friend Mr. Merriman needlessly disturbs himself, I think. I apprehend no immediate difficulty with the new Subah, although 'tis true there have been little vexations. As to the goods, they are in Coja Solomon's godown; they were delivered some time ago and paid for; what the reason of the delay is I cannot tell. One thing I may mention--it appears that Mr. Merriman is ignorant of it: Coja Solomon has lately become the agent of Omichand, whose peons have been seen to visit him, then passing on to Murshidabad. I happen to know also that he has communicated with Coja Wajid: do you know anything of him?"

"No, sir, I have never heard his name."

"He's a rich Armenian trader in Hugli, and acts as agent between the Nawab and the French and Dutch. We suspect him of encouraging Siraj-uddaula against us; but of course we can't prove anything. My advice to you is, be wary and be quick; don't trust any of these fellows further than you can see them. But you can't do anything to-night. You will allow me to give you a bed: in the morning you can make a call on Coja Solomon. What has become of your peons?"

"A Babu I brought with me is looking after them. But I have an English seaman also: can you tell me what to do with him?"

"Sure he can lodge with Sergeant Bowler close by--near the south-east bastion. The sergeant will be glad of the company of a fellow-countryman; your man will be a change after the Dutchmen and topasses he has to do with."

Early next morning Desmond, accompanied by Surendra Nath, went to find Coja Solomon. He lived in a house not far from the Armenian Church, between it and the river. The Armenian was at home. He received Desmond with great politeness, assuring him with much volubility that he had but one interest in life, and that was the business of his honourable employer Mr. Merriman. He invited Desmond to accompany him to the godown near the river where the goods were stored--muslins of Dacca, both plain and flowered, Bengal raw silk, and taffeties manufactured in Cossimbazar.

"You have not been long in the country, sir," said Coja Solomon, with a shrewd look at Desmond, "and therefore you will find it hard to believe, perhaps, that these goods, so insignificant in bulk, are worth over two lakhs of rupees. A precious load indeed, sir. This delay is naturally a cause of vexation to my distin-

guished superior, but it is not due to any idleness or inattention on my part. It is caused by the surprising difficulty of getting the dastaks countersigned by the Faujdar.[#] Without his signature, as you know, the goods cannot be removed. I dare not venture."

[#] Officer in command of troops, and also a magistrate.

"But why didn't the Faujdar sign the papers?"

"That I cannot tell. I send messengers to him: they come back: the Faujdar is much occupied with the Nawab's business, but he will attend to this little matter as soon as he has leisure. He calls it a little matter; and so it is, perhaps, if we remember that the Nawab's wealth is reckoned by millions; but it is not a little matter to Mr. Merriman, and I deeply deplore the unfortunate delay."

"Well, be good enough to send another message at once. Represent to the Faujdar that Mr. Merriman's ship is prevented from sailing until the goods reach Calcutta, and that this causes great inconvenience and loss." Here the Babu whispered in his ear. "Yes, and add--you will know how to put it--that if the dastaks are sent off immediately, the Faujdar will receive from Mr. Merriman a suitable gratification."

The Armenian rubbed his hands and smilingly assented; but Desmond, who had had some practice in reading faces since he left Market Drayton eighteen months before, felt an uneasy suspicion that Coja Solomon was a scamp. Returning to the factory he acquainted Mr. Watts with the result of his interview and his opinion of the agent. The chief's eye twinkled.

"You haven't been long reckoning him up, Mr. Burke. I'm afraid you're right. I'll see what I can do for you."

Calling "Qui hai!"[#] he ordered the peon who appeared in answer to his summons to go to the black merchants' houses, a row of two-storey buildings some forty yards from the south-west bastion, and bring back with him Babu Joti Lai Chatterji.

[#] "Is there any one?"--used as a summons.

In less than ten minutes the man returned with an intelligent-looking young Bengali. Mr. Watts addressed the latter in Hindustani, bidding him hasten to Murshidabad and find out quietly what the Faujdar was doing with the dastaks. When he

had gone, Mr. Watts showed Desmond over the fort, introduced him to his wife, and then took him round the English settlement.

Next day Joti Lai Chatterji returned from Murshidabad with the news that the dastaks, duly signed by the Faujdar, had been delivered to Coja Solomon a fortnight before.

"'Tis rather worse than I expected," said Mr. Watts gravely. "There is something in this that I do not understand. We will send for Coja Solomon."

No one could have seemed more genuinely surprised than the Armenian when informed of what had been learnt. He had received no dastaks, he declared; either a mistake had been made, or the papers had been intercepted, possibly by some enemy who had a grudge against him and wished to embroil him with his employer. It was annoying, he agreed; and he offered to go to Murshidabad himself and, if necessary, get other dastaks signed.

"Very well," said Mr. Watts, from whose manner no one could have guessed that he suspected his visitor. "We will look for you to-morrow."

The man departed. Nothing was heard of him for two days. Then a letter arrived, saying that he remained in Murshidabad, awaiting the return of the Faujdar, who had been summoned to Rajmahal by the Nawab Siraj-uddaula. Three more days slipped by, and nothing further was heard from Coja Solomon. Desmond became more and more impatient. Bulger suggested that they should break into the godown and remove the goods without any ceremony--a course that Desmond himself was not disinclined to adopt; but when he hinted at it to Mr. Watts that gentleman's look of horror could not have been more expressive if his consent had been asked to a crime.

"Why, Mr. Burke, if we acted in that impetuous way we'd have all Bengal at our throats. Trade must pass through the usual channels; to convey goods from here to Calcutta without a dastak would be a grave misdemeanour, if not high treason; and it would get us into very hot water with the Nawab. I can only advise patience."

One morning, Desmond had just finished breakfast with Mr. Watts and his wife, when Lieutenant Elliott, in command of the garrison, came unceremoniously into the room.

"Mr. Watts," he said, "the fat's in the fire. A lot of the Nawab's Persian cavalry have come into the town during the night. They have surrounded the French and Dutch factories and are coming on here."

"Don't be alarmed, my dear," said the chief, as his wife started up in a state of panic; "'tis only one of the Nawab's tricks. He has used that means of extorting money before. We'll buy them off, never fear."

But it was soon seen that the troops had come with a more serious purpose. They completely invested the factory, and next day withdrew the guards that had

been placed around the French and Dutch forts, and confined their whole attention to the British. Mr. Watts withdrew all the garrison and officials behind the bastioned walls of the fort, and fearing that an attack in force would be made upon him, despatched a kasid[#] to Calcutta with an urgent request for reinforcements. While waiting anxiously for the reply, he took stock of his position. His garrison numbered only fifty men all told, half of them being Dutch deserters and the remainder half-caste topasses, with only two English officers, Lieutenant Elliott and Sergeant Bowler. The guns of the fort were old; and within a few yards of the walls were houses that would afford excellent cover to the enemy. Without help resistance for any length of time was impossible, and to resist at all meant a declaration of war against the Nawab, and would entail serious consequences--possibly involve the total ruin of the Company in Bengal. In this difficult position Mr. Watts hoped that an opportunity of making an arrangement with the besiegers would offer itself. Meanwhile, pending the arrival of instructions from Calcutta, he gave orders that any attempt to force an entrance to the fort was to be repelled.

[#] Courier.

But no letters came from Calcutta. Though several were despatched, none of them reached Cossimbazar. On June 1 Rai Durlabh, in command of the besiegers, received orders from the Nawab, now at Murshidabad, to take the fort. He came to the gate and tried to force an entrance, but hurriedly withdrew when he met Sergeant Bowler's gleaming bayonet and saw the gunners standing by with lighted matches in their hands. By and by he sent a messenger asking Mr. Watts to come out and parley, and offering a betel, the usual native pledge of safe-conduct. Against the advice of Lieutenant Elliott, Mr. Watts decided to leave the fort and visit the Nawab himself. Next day, therefore, with Mr. Forth the surgeon and two servants, he departed, cheerfully declaring that he would make all right with Siraj-uddaula. Mr. Forth returned a day later with the news that on reaching the Nawab's tent both he and Mr. Watts had had their arms bound behind their backs and been led as prisoners into Siraj-uddaula's presence. The Nawab had demanded their signatures to a document binding the English at Calcutta to demolish their fortifications. Mr. Watts explained that the signatures of two other members of his Council were required, hoping that the delay would allow time for help to reach him from Calcutta. After some hesitation two gentlemen left the fort with the surgeon. The same evening Mr. Forth once more returned to inform the garrison that the members of Council had likewise been imprisoned, and that

Mr. Watts recommended Lieutenant Elliott to deliver up the fort and ammunition.

The merchants in the factory were aghast; Lieutenant Elliott fumed with indignation; but they saw that they had no alternative. Their chief had been removed by treachery; to resist was hopeless; and though such submission to a native was galling they could but recognize their helplessness and make the best of a bad situation. Desmond, besides sharing in their anger, had a further cause for concern in the almost certain loss of Mr. Merriman's goods. But the fort would not be given up till next day, and before he retired to rest he received a message that turned his thoughts into another channel and made him set his wits to work.

During the siege natives had been allowed to go freely in and out between the fort and the settlement; Rai Durlabh was confident in his superior numbers and could afford to regard with indifference the despatch of messages to Calcutta. A messenger came to Desmond in the evening from Surendra Nath, to say that Coja Solomon had returned to Cossimbazar, and was now loading up Mr. Merriman's goods in petalas,[#] their destination being Murshidabad. Desmond saw at once that the Armenian was taking advantage of the disturbance to make away with the goods for his own behoof. He could always pretend afterwards that his godown had been plundered. It was pretty clear, too, that his long detention of the goods must be due to his having had a hint of the Nawab's plans.

[#] Cargo boats.

This news reached Desmond just after Mr. Forth had brought orders for the surrender of the fort. He kept his own counsel. After his experience at Gheria he was resolved not to be made a prisoner again; but he would not be content with merely saving his own skin. Mr. Merriman's goods were valuable; it touched Desmond's self-esteem to think he should be bested by a rascally Armenian. If there had been any prospect of a fight in defence of the fort he would have stayed to take his part in it; but as the factory was to be given up without a struggle he saw no reason for considering anything except the interests of Mr. Merriman and himself.

Only one thing gave him a slight qualm. The equities of the case were perfectly clear; but he had some doubt as to the issue if it should become known that he had forcibly made off with the goods. The relations between the Nawab and the Company were so strained, and the circumstances of the moment so dangerous, that such action on his part might prove the spark to a train of gunpowder. But he could not help thinking that the Nawab was in any case bent on picking a quarrel with the Company; anything that Desmond might do would be but one

petty incident in a possible campaign; meanwhile the goods were worth two lakhs of rupees, a serious loss to Mr. Merriman if Coja Solomon's plans succeeded; an effort to save them was surely worth the risk, and they could only be saved if he could secure them before the Armenian's boats had started for Murshidabad.

He did not take long to decide upon a plan. Calling the native who had attended him in the fort, he sent him out to Surendra Nath with instructions to prepare his peons for instant action. Bulger was with them; he had been absent from Bowler's house when the order came to retire to the fort, and only just succeeded in joining Surendra Nath before the investment began. From Joti Lai Chatterji, the man whom Mr. Watts had employed to make inquiries in Murshidabad, the servant was to get a dress such as would be worn by a khitmatgar,[#] and some material for staining the skin. In the darkness Desmond hoped that he might pass without question for a native so long as disguise was necessary.

[#] Table servant.

Within an hour the man returned, bringing the articles required.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

In which Coja Solomon finds dishonesty the worse policy; and a journey down the Hugli little to his liking.

The short twilight was thickening into darkness when Desmond, with face, legs, and arms stained brown, slipped out of the fort in native dress and walked slowly towards the houses of the native merchants. In his hand he carried a small bundle. Reaching the house where his party was staying, kept by one Abdul Kader, he almost betrayed himself by forgetting to slip off his sandals as he entered. But he bethought himself in time and was admitted without question.

He found that he was not a moment too soon. Bulger had taken up his quarters there with a very bad grace, the arrival of the Nawab's army having aroused in him the fighting spirit of the sturdy British tar. But when the news

ran through the settlement that the fort was to be given up, his feelings overcame him, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that Surendra Nath had persuaded him to wait patiently for orders from Desmond. Then the Babu himself had quitted the house, and Bulger was left without the restraint of any one who could speak English. He was on the point of casting off all prudence and stalking out like Achilles from his tent, when Desmond arrived.

"By thunder, sir!" he said, when he had recovered from his astonishment at seeing Desmond in native dress, "I en't a-goin' to surrender to no Moors, sure as my name's Bulger. 'Tis a downright scandalous shame; that's what I call it."

"Well, you can tell Mr. Watts so if you ever see him. At present we have no time to waste in talk. Where is Surendra Nath?"

"Gone to keep his weather-eye on the codger's godown, sir."

"Which shows he's a man of sense. Are all the men here?"

"So far as I know, sir. I may be wrong."

"Well, they'll make their way in small parties down to the river. 'Tis dark enough now; they will not be noticed, and they can steal along the bank under the trees until they come near Coja Solomon's ghat. You must come with me."

"Very good, sir," replied Bulger, hitching up his breeches and drawing his hanger.

"But not like that. You'll have to get those black whiskers of yours shaved, my man. If they grew all over you'd pass perhaps for a Moor; but not with a fringe like that. And you must stain your face; I have the stuff in this bundle; and we'll borrow a dhoti and sandals from Abdul Kader. We'll dress you up between us."

Bulger looked aghast.

"Dash my buttons, sir, I'll look like a November guy! What would my mates say, a-seein' me dressed up like a stuffed Moor at Smithfield fair--a penny a shy, sir?"

"Your mates are not here to see you, and if you hold your tongue they'll never know it."

"But what about this little corkscrew o' mine, sir? I don't see any ways o' dressin' that up."

"You can stick it into your dhoti. Now here are soap and a razor; I give you ten minutes to shave and get your face stained; Abdul Kader will help. Quick's the word, man."

A quarter of an hour later Desmond left the house with Bulger, the latter, in spite of the darkness, looking very much ashamed of himself. The other members of the party had already gone towards the river. Walking very slowly until they had safely cleared the lines of the investing troops, the two hurried their pace and about half-past eight reached the Armenian's godown. The three boats containing Mr. Merriman's goods were moored at the ghat. A number of men were on board,

and bales were still being carried down by the light of torches. It appeared that Coja Solomon had no intention of leaving until the factory was actually in Rai Durlabh's hands.

Desmond had already decided that, to legalize his position, he must gain possession of the dastaks. Not that they would help him much if, as was only too probable, Coja Solomon should be backed up by the Nawab. As soon as it was discovered that the goods had been carried off, kasids would undoubtedly be sent along the banks, possibly swift boats would set off down the river in pursuit, and, dastaks or no dastaks, the goods would be impounded at Khulna or Hugli and himself arrested. It was therefore of the first importance that the loss of the boats should not be discovered until he was well on his way, and to ensure this he must secure the person of Coja Solomon. If that could be done there was a chance of delaying the pursuit, or preventing it altogether.

Desmond kept well in the shelter of the palm trees as he made his observation of the ghat. He wondered where Surendra Nath was, but could not waste time in looking for him. Retracing his steps with Bulger for some little distance, he came to a spot on the river bank where the rest of his party were waiting in a boat, moored to an overhanging tree. He ordered the men to land; then, leaving Bulger in charge of them, he selected three of the armed peons and with them made his way across paddy[#] fields towards the Armenian's house, a hundred yards or so from the bank. Light came through the reed-screened window. Bidding the men remain outside and rush in if he called them, he left the shelter of the trees and, approaching the door, stumbled over the darwan lying across the threshold.

[#] Rice.

"Uthao,[#] Marwan!" he said, with the bluntness of servant addressing servant; "sleeping again! Go and tell your master I'm here to see him: a khitmatgar from the fort."

[#] Get up.

The man rose sleepily and preceded him into the house. He made the announcement, salaamed and retired. Desmond went in.

In a little room on the ground floor Coja Solomon reclined on a divan, smok-

ing his hubble-bubble. A small oil-lamp burnt in a pendant above his head. He looked up as Desmond entered; if he thought that his visitor was somewhat better set-up than the average khitmatgar, he did not suspect any disguise. The light was dim, and Coja Solomon was growing old.

"Good evening, Khwaja," said Desmond quietly.

The man jumped as if shot.

"No, don't get up, and don't make a noise. My business with you will not take long. I will ask you to hand over Mr. Merriman's dastaks. I know that they are in your possession. I have come to get them, and to take away the goods--Mr. Merriman's goods."

The Armenian had meanwhile removed the mouthpiece of his hubble-bubble, and was bending over as if to replace it by one of several that lay on a shelf at his right hand. But Desmond noticed that beneath the shelf stood a small gong. He whipped out a pistol, and pointed it full at the merchant.

"Don't touch that," he said curtly. "I have not come unprepared, as you see. Your plans are known to me. If you value your life you will do as I wish without delay or disturbance. My men are outside; a word from me will bring them swarming in. Now, the dastaks!"

Coja Solomon was an Armenian and a merchant; in neither capacity a fighting man. In a contest of wits he could be as cool and as ready as any man in Bengal; but he had no skill in arms and no physical courage. There was an air of determination about his visitor that impressed him; and he felt by no means comfortable within point-blank range of the pistol covering him so completely. If his thoughts had been read, they would have run somewhat thus: "Pistols have been known to go off accidentally. What will the goods profit me if such an accident happen now? Besides, even if I yield there may still be a chance of saving them. It is a long way to Calcutta: the river is low: God be praised the rains have not begun! There are shallows and rocks along its course: the boats must go slowly: and the Nawab's horsemen can soon outstrip them on the banks. The dog of an Englishman thinks he has outwitted me: we shall see. And he is only a youth: let us see if Coja Solomon is not a match for him."

Rising to his feet, he smiled and shrugged, and spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"It is true the dastaks are here," he said suavely, "but they only reached me yesterday, and indeed, as soon as I received them, I had the goods put on board the boats for transit to Calcutta."

"That is very fortunate," said Desmond. "It will save my time. As Mr. Merriman's representative I will take over the goods--with the dastaks."

"If you will excuse me, I will fetch them."

"Stay!" said Desmond, as the man moved towards the door. He had not

lowered the pistol. "Where are they?"

"They are in my office beside the godown."

"Very well. It would be a pity to trouble you to bring them here. I will go with you. Will you lead the way?"

He knew it was a lie. Valuable papers would not be left in a hut of an office, and he had already noticed a curiously wrought almara[#] at one end of the room--just the place to keep documents.

[#] Cabinet.

There was a shadow of a scowl on the Armenian's face. The man hesitated; then walked towards the door: stopped as if at a sudden recollection; and turned to Desmond with a bland smile.

"I was forgetting," he said; "I brought the papers here for safety sake."

He went to the almara, searched for a moment, and handed two papers to Desmond.

"There, sir," he said, with a quite paternal smile; "you take the responsibility. In these unfortunate circumstances"--he waved his hand in the direction of the factory--"it is, believe me, a relief to me to see the last of these papers."

"That is well."

But Desmond, as he took the papers, felt himself in a quandary. Though he could speak, he could not read, Hindustani! The papers might not be the dastaks after all. What was he to do? The peons were not likely to be able to read. He scanned the papers. There was the name Merriman in English characters, but all the rest was in native script. The smile hovering on the Armenian's face annoyed Desmond, and he was still undecided what to do when a voice at his elbow gave him welcome relief.

"Babu Surendra Nath Chuckerbutti," announced the darwan.

The Babu entered.

"Come and tell me if these are our dastaks," said Desmond.

The Babu ran his eye over the papers, and declared:

"Yes, sir, they are the identical papers, and I perceive the signature of the Faujdar is dated three weeks ago."

"Thank you," said Desmond. "Now, Coja Solomon, I must ask you to come with me."

"Why, sir----" began the Armenian, no longer smiling.

"I will explain to you by and by.--What is it, Surendra Nath?"

The Babu whispered a word or two in his ear.

"A happy thought!" said Desmond. "Surendra Nath suggests that I should borrow that excellent robe I see yonder, Khwaja; and your turban also. They will become me better than this khitmatgar's garb, I doubt not."

Coja Solomon looked on helplessly as Desmond exchanged his meaner garments for the richer clothes of his unwilling host.

"Now we will go. You will tell the darwan that you have gone down to the ghat, so that if a question is asked he will be at no loss for an answer."

In the faint light of the rising moon the barrel of the pistol gleamed as they came into the open. The Armenian marched between Desmond and the Babu. Behind came the three peons, moving as silently as ghosts.

"The Khwaja," said Desmond to them in the Armenian's hearing, as they reached the ghat, "is coming a little way with us down the river. You, Kristodas Das, will go and tell Bulger Sahib that I wish him to follow the Khwaja's boats at a few yards' distance, and to be prepared to board at any moment. You," turning to the other two peons, "will come with me. The Khwaja will send word to his darwan that he is going to Murshidabad by river and will not return to-night; his house is to be locked up. The Khwaja will, I am sure, give these orders correctly, for Surendra Nath will understand better than I what he says."

With the Babu, the two peons, and Coja Solomon, who was now obviously ill at ease, Desmond went down the ghat to the place where the crews of the petalas were squatting, and bade the Armenian carry out the part assigned to him. The man durst not depart by a jot from the words put into his mouth. One of his coolies left with the message, the rest followed their employer on board with Desmond and his companions, and in a few minutes the three boats were cast off and stood up stream. As they started Desmond saw the boat containing Bulger and his men slip from the shade of the trees and begin to creep after them.

The boats had not gone for more than a couple of hundred yards up stream when Coja Solomon, at Desmond's orders, bade the men row towards the opposite shore and turn the boats' heads round, explaining that he had decided after all to convey the goods to Hugli. There was some grumbling among the crew, who had expected to go to Murshidabad, and did not relish the prospect of the longer voyage. But the Armenian, knowing that every word was overheard by Desmond's men, made haste to pacify the boatmen.

It was by no means easy work getting down the river. The boats were flat-bottomed and drew very little water; but the stream being very low, they stuck fast time after time in the shallows. By day the boatmen might have picked their way more carefully, but the moon was new and shed too little light for river navigation. More than once they had to leap overboard and, wading, shove and haul until the boats came off the mud banks into practicable water again. They rowed hard when the course was clear, encouraged by promises of liberal bakshish made by

their employer at Desmond's prompting. But the interruptions were so frequent that the dawn found the boats only some thirty miles from their starting-point. The river being here a little deeper, Desmond could afford to let the rowers take a much needed rest, while the boats floated down with the stream.

But as the day wore on the river again played them false, and progress was at times reduced to scarcely more than two miles an hour. Things had been uncomfortable in the night, but the discomforts were increased tenfold in the day. It was the hottest season of the year; out of the clear sky the sun's rays beat down with pitiless ferocity; the whole landscape was a-quiver with heat; all things seemed to swoon under the oppression. The petalas, being cargo boats, were not provided with any accommodation or conveniences for passengers; and Desmond's thoughts, as he lay panting on his mat, haggard from want of sleep, faint from want of food--for though there was rice on board, and the men ate freely, he had no appetite for that--reverted to the worst period of his imprisonment in Gheria, and he recalled the sufferings he had endured there. Here at least he was free. His journey had so far been unmolested, and he hoped that the happy chance that had favoured him at Cossimbazar would not fail him now.

He was in a fever of impatience; yet the men were doing their best. They passed the mud walls of Cutwa; another stage of the journey was safely completed; but twelve miles lower down there was a post at Patli, and with every mile the danger grew. Desmond talked over the situation with the Babu. Surendra Nath agreed that by nightfall, if no unforeseen delay occurred, they might hope to be in the neighbourhood of Khulna, and arrive there before any messenger carrying news of the escape. But there was little or no chance of the same good fortune at Hugli. The prize was so valuable that every effort would certainly be made to stop them. A whole day or more might pass before the reason of Coja Solomon's absence was discovered. But when the discovery was made, fast runners would be sent to Khulna and Hugli, and by relays the distance between Cossimbazar and Hugli could be covered in twenty-two hours. Supposing such a messenger started at nightfall on June 5, nearly twenty-four hours after Coja Solomon's disappearance, he might well get to Hugli long before the fugitive boats, even if they were rowed all night without cessation; and the men were already so much fatigued that such continuous exertion could hardly be expected of them.

There was a further danger. If the news of the capture of Cossimbazar Fort had preceded him, he might be stopped at any of the riverside places without any reference to Coja Solomon's abduction, pending orders from the Nawab. Desmond's anxiety would have been largely increased had he known that Sirajuddaula, before his men had actually marched into the fort, had already started with the bulk of his forces on his fateful march to Calcutta.

Desmond was still in conversation with the Babu when the little flotilla came in sight of Patli. Its approach was observed. A boat put off from the ghat, and awaited the arrival of Desmond's boat in mid-stream. As it came alongside an official ordered the men to cease rowing and demanded to know who was the owner of the goods on board and to see the dastaks. The Babu, to whom Desmond had entrusted the papers, showed them to the man; he scanned them, said that he was satisfied, and rowed back to the ghat. Evidently he had no suspicions. During the short colloquy Desmond kept close beside the Armenian, who was well known to the riverside official; but Coja Solomon was thoroughly scared, and had not the presence of mind to do anything more than acknowledge the customary salaam.

Desmond breathed freely once more now that Patli was passed. But two-thirds of the journey still remained to be completed, and he could not dare hope that at his slow rate of progress he would be able always to keep ahead of information from Cossimbazar. Seeing that he could not hasten his journey, he wondered whether it was possible to put pursuers off the scent. After thinking for a while he said to the Babu, out of hearing of the Armenian:

"I have an idea, Surendra Nath: tell me what you think of it. Did you not tell me as we came up that there is a gumashta[#] of the Company at Santipur?"

[#] Agent.

"Certainly I did, sir."

"Well, as we are, I fear, sure to be cut off by water, may we not take to the land? Could not the gumashta get us a dozen hackeris[#]? We could transfer the goods to them and elude our pursuers perhaps long enough for help to arrive from Calcutta."

[#] Bullock-carts.

"That is good counsel, sir; why should we not do so?"

Accordingly, when they came to the spot where the high road crossed the river by a ford, Desmond ordered his men to row in to the left bank. Selecting two men who knew the country, he bade them land and make the best speed in carrying out instructions which he proceeded to give them.

"You, Mohun Lai," he said, "will go to Santipur, quickly, avoiding observation, and request the gumashta in Merriman Sahib's name to have twelve hackeris,

or as many as he can collect, ready to receive loads two or three hours before tomorrow's dawn. He must get them from the villages, not from Khulna or Amboa, and he must not tell any one why he requires the carts. You, Ishan, will go on to Calcutta, find Merriman Sahib, and ask him to send a body of armed men along the Barrakpur road towards Santipur. You will tell him what we have done, and also that Cossimbazar Fort is in the hands of the Nawab, and Watts Sahib a prisoner. He may know this already. You both understand?"

The men salaamed and started on their journey.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND

In which is given a full, true, and particular account of the Battle of the Carts.

Desmond expected that Mohun Lai would reach Santipur shortly after nightfall. He himself might hope to arrive there, if not intercepted at Khulna or Amboa, at any time between midnight and three o'clock, according to the state of the river. It was approaching dusk when he drew near to Khulna. The boats having been tied up to the bank, as the custom was, Desmond sent the Babu to find out from the Company's gumashta whether news of the capture of Cossimbazar Fort had reached the bazar, and if any runner had come in from the north. In an hour the Babu returned. He said that there was great excitement in the bazar; no official messenger had arrived, but everybody was saying that the Nawab had captured the English factory at Cossimbazar, and was going to drive all the Firangi out of Bengal.

Desmond decided to take a bold course. Official news not having arrived, he might seize the moment to present his dastaks and get away before the customs officers found any pretext for stopping him. Everything happened as he hoped. He met with no more difficulty than at Patli, and informing the official who examined the dastaks that he would drop down to Amboa before tying up for the night, he drew out again into the stream.

He spent some time in consultation with the serang. In a rather desolate reach of the Hugli, he learnt, and in the middle of the stream, there was a small island, uninhabited save by teal and other water-fowl, and not known to be the haunt of tigers or other beasts of prey. Reaching this islet about ten o'clock at

night, when all river traffic had ceased, he rowed in, and landed the Armenian with his crews.

"I thank you for your company, Coja Solomon," he said blandly. "We must here part, to my regret, for I should like to have the pleasure of witnessing your meeting with Mr. Merriman. The nights are warm, and you will, I am sure, be quite comfortable till the morning, when no doubt a passing boat will take you off and convey you back to your business at Cossimbazar."

"I will not stay here," protested the Armenian, his face livid with anger.

"Believe me, you have no choice. Let me remind you that had you behaved honestly there would have been no reason for putting you to the inconvenience of this tiring journey. You have brought it on yourself."

Coja Solomon sullenly went up the shore. Desmond then paid the men handsomely: they had indeed worked well, and they were abundantly satisfied with the hire they received.

Leaving Coja Solomon to his bitter reflections, Desmond dropped down to Santipur, arriving there about two o'clock in the morning. Just before dawn ten hackeris, each yoked with two oxen, drew up near the Company's ghat. They were accompanied by a crowd of the inhabitants, lively with curiosity about the engagement of so many vehicles. The gumashta came up with the first cart, his face clouded with anxiety. He recognized the Babu at once, and said that while he had fulfilled the order he had received on Mr. Merriman's behalf, he had done it in fear and trembling. The whole country knew that Cossimbazar Fort was in possession of the Nawab, and, more than that, the Nawab had on the previous day set out with an immense army for Calcutta. Santipur was not on the high road, and the Company was respected there; yet the gumashta feared the people would make an attack on the party if they suspected that they carried goods belonging to an Englishman.

Hitherto Desmond had kept himself in the background. But now he had an idea inspired by confidence in his costume. Introducing himself to the gumashta, he asked him to give out that the party was in command of a Firangi in the service of the Nawab, and was conveying part of the Nawab's private equipage in advance to Baraset, a few miles north of Calcutta, there to await the arrival of the main army. To make the imposition more effective, he called for the lambadar[#] of the village and ordered him in the Nawab's name to despatch a flotilla of twenty-five wollacks[#] to Cutwa to convey the official baggage. The plan proved successful. Desmond found himself regarded as a person of importance; the natives humbly salaamed to him; and, taking matters with a high hand, he impressed a score of the village idlers into the work of transferring his precious bales from the boats to the hackeris. The work was accomplished in half an hour.

[#] Headman.
[#] Barges.

"Bulger," said Desmond, when the loading was done, "you will consider yourself in charge of this convoy. The Babu will interpret for you. You will hurry on as fast as possible towards Calcutta. I shall overtake you by and by. The people here believe that I am a Frenchman, so you had better pass as that too, for of course your disguise will deceive no native in the daylight."

"Well I knows it," said Bulger. "They've been starin' at me like as if I was a prize pig this half-hour and more, and lookin' most uncommon curious at my little button-hook. But, sir, I don't see any call for me to make out I'm a mounseer. 'T'ud make me uneasy inside, sir, the very thought of eatin' what they mounseers eat."

"My good man, there's no need to carry it too far. Do as you please, only take care of the goods."

Except Desmond and four men whom he retained, the whole party moved off with the hackeris towards Calcutta. The road was an unmade track, heavy with dust, rough, execrably bad; and at the gumashta's suggestion Desmond had arranged for three extra teams of oxen to accompany the carts, to extricate them in case of necessity from holes or soft places. Fortunately the weather was dry: had the rains begun--and they were overdue--the road would have been a slough of mud and ooze, and the journey would have been impossible.

When the convoy had set off, Desmond with three men, including the serang, returned to the empty boats. The lookers-on stared to see the craft put off and drop down the river with a crew of one man each: Desmond in the first, and the smaller boat that had contained Bulger and his party trailing behind. Floating down some four or five miles with the stream, Desmond gave the order to scuttle the three petalas, and rowed ashore in the smaller boat. On reaching land he got the serang to knock a hole in the bottom of the boat, and shoved it off towards mid stream, where it rapidly filled and sank.

It was full daylight when Desmond and his party of three struck off inland in a direction that would bring them upon the track of the carts. He had a presentiment that his difficulties were only beginning. By this time, no doubt, the news of his escapade had been carried through the country by the swift kasids of the Nawab. His passing at Khulna and Amboa would be reported, and a watch would be kept for him at Hugli. If perchance a kasid or a chance traveller entered Santipur, the trick he had practised there would be immediately discovered; but if the messenger only touched at the places on the direct route on the other bank, he might hope that some time would elapse before the authorities there suspected

that he had left the river. They must soon learn that three petalas lay wrecked in the stream below Amboa; but they could not satisfy themselves without examination that these were the vessels of which they were in search.

Tramping across two miles of fields newly sown with maize and sorghum, he at length descried the trail of his convoy and soon came up with it. If pursuers were indeed upon his track, only by the greatest good fortune could he escape them. The carts creaked along with painful slowness; the wheels half-way to the axles in dust; now stopping altogether, now rocking like ships in a stormy sea. With his arrival and the promise of liberal bakshish the hackeriwallahs urged the labouring oxen with their cruel goads till Desmond, always tender with animals, could hardly endure the sight. By nine o'clock the morning had become stiflingly hot. There was little or no breeze, and Desmond, unused of late to active exercise, found the heat terribly trying. But Bulger suffered still more. A stout, florid man, he toiled along, panting, streaming with sweat, in difficulties so manifest that Desmond, eyeing him anxiously, feared lest a stroke of apoplexy should bring him to an untimely end.

The country was so flat that a string of carts could not fail to be seen from a long distance. If noticed from the towers of Hugli across the river, curiosity, if not suspicion, would be aroused, and it would not take long to send over by a ford a force sufficient to arrest and capture the party. To escape observation it was necessary to make wide detours. At several small hamlets on the route Desmond managed to get fresh oxen, but not enough for complete changes of team. So, through all the broiling heat of the day, at hours when no other Europeans in all Bengal were out of doors, the convoy struggled on, making its own road, crossing the dry beds of pools, skirting or labouring over rugged nullahs.

At nightfall Desmond learnt from one of the drivers that they were still six miles short of being opposite to Hugli. The patient Bengalis could endure no more; the oxen were done up, the men refused to go further without a rest. Halting at a hamlet some five miles from the river, they rested and fed till midnight, then set off again. It was not so insufferably hot at night, but on the other hand they were less able to avoid obstructions: and the rest had not been long enough to make up for the terrible exertions of the day.

By daybreak they were some distance past Hugli, still keeping about five miles from the river. Desmond was beginning to congratulate himself that the worst was over; Barrakpur was only about twelve miles away. But a little after dawn he caught sight of a European on horseback crossing their track towards the river. He was going at a walking pace, attended by two syces.[#] Attracted, apparently, by the sight, unusual at this time of year, of a string of hackeris, he wheeled his horse and cantered towards the tail of the convoy, which was under Bulger's charge.

[#] Grooms.

"Eo, hackeriwallah," he said in Urdu to the rearmost driver, "to whom do these hackeris belong?"

"To the great Company, huzur. The sahib will tell you."

"The sahib!--what sahib?" asked the rider in astonishment.

"The sahib yonder," replied the man, pointing to Bulger. Bulger had been staring at the horseman, and growing more and more red in the face. Catching the rider's surprised look, he could contain himself no longer.

"By thunder! 'tis that villain Diggle!" he shouted, and rushed forward to drag him from his horse.

But Diggle was not taken unawares. Setting spurs to his steed, he caused it to spring away. Bulger raised his musket, but ere he could fire Diggle was out of range. Keeping a careful distance he rode leisurely along the whole convoy, and a smile of malignant pleasure shone upon his face as he took stock of its contents. Meanwhile Bulger, already repenting of his hasty action, hurried forward to acquaint Desmond with what had happened. Diggle's smile broadened; he halted and took a long look at the tall figure in native dress to whom Bulger was so excitedly speaking. Then, turning his horse in the direction of the river, he spoke over his shoulder to his syces and galloped away, followed by them at a run.

"You were a fool, Bulger," said Desmond testily. "This may lead to no end of trouble."

Bulger looked penitent, and wrathful, and overwhelmed.

"We must try to hurry," added Desmond to Surendra Nath. "Promise the men more bakshish: don't stint."

For two hours longer they pushed on with all the speed of which the jaded beasts were capable. Every now and again Desmond looked anxiously back, hoping against hope that they would not be pursued. But he knew that Diggle had recognized him, and being prepared for the worst, he began to rack his brains for some means of defence. Misfortune seemed to dog him. Two of the oxen collapsed. It was necessary to distribute the loads of their hackeris among the others. The march was delayed, and when the convoy was again under way, its progress was slower than ever.

It had, indeed, barely started, when in the distance Desmond spied a horseman cantering towards them. A few minutes revealed him as Diggle. He rode up almost within musket-shot, then turned and trotted back. What was the meaning of his action? Desmond, from his position near the foremost hackeri, could see nothing more. But, a few yards ahead of him, to the right of the track, there was a low artificial mound, possibly the site of an ancient temple, standing at the edge

of a nullah, its top some ten or twelve feet above the surrounding plain. Hastening to this he gained the summit, and, looking back, saw a numerous body of men on foot advancing rapidly from the quarter whence the horseman had ridden. In twenty minutes they would have come up with the convoy. He must turn at bay.

He glanced anxiously around. He was in the midst of a dry, slightly undulating plain, the new-sown fields awaiting the rains to spring into verdure. Here and there were clumps of trees--the towering palmyra with its fan-shaped foliage, the bamboo with its feathery branches, the plantain, throwing its immense leaves of vivid green into every fantastic form. There was no safety on the plain. But below him was the nullah, thirty feet deep, eighty yards wide, soon to be a swollen torrent dashing towards the Hugli, but now dry. Its sides were in parts steep, and unscalable in face of determined resistance. In a moment Desmond saw the utmost of possibility.

Running back to the convoy, he turned its head towards the mound, and, calling every man to the help of the oxen, he dragged the carts one by one to the top. There he caused the beasts to be unyoked, and placed the hackeris, their poles interlocked, so as to form a rough semicircular breastwork around the summit of the mound. For a moment he hesitated in deciding what to do with the cattle. Should he keep them within his little entrenchment? If they took fright they might stampede and do mischief; in any case they would be in the way, and he resolved to send them all off under charge of such of the drivers as were too timid to remain. He noticed that the Babu was quivering with alarm.

"Surendra Nath," he said, "this is no place for you. Slip away quietly; go towards Calcutta; and if you meet Mr. Merriman coming in response to my message, tell him the plight we are in and ask him to hasten to our help."

"I do not like to show the white feather, sir," said the Babu.

"Not at all, Babu, we must have a trustworthy messenger: you are the man. Now get away as fast as you can."

The Babu departed on his errand with the speed of gladness and relief.

The ground sloped sharply outwards from the carts, and the rear of the position was formed by the nullah. The last two hackeris were being placed in position when the vanguard of the pursuers, with Diggle at their head, came to a point just out of range. The party was larger than Desmond had estimated it to be at his first hasty glance. There were some twenty men armed with matchlocks, and forty with swords and lathis. All were natives. His heart sank as he measured the odds against him. What was his dismay when he saw, half a mile off, another body following up. And these were white men! Was Diggle bringing the French of Chandernagore into the fray?

Desmond posted his twelve armed peons behind the hackeris. He gave them strict orders to fire only at the word of command, and as they had undergone

some discipline in Calcutta he hoped that, if only in self-preservation, they would maintain a certain steadiness. Behind them he placed twelve sturdy boatmen armed with half pikes, instructing them to take the place of the peons when they had fired. Bulger stood at the midpoint of the semicircle; his rough square face was a deep purple with a rim of black; his dhoti had become loosened, leaving his great shoulders and brawny chest bare; his turban was awry; his eyes, bloodshot with the heat, were as the eyes of Mars himself, burning with the fire of battle.

The pursuers had halted. Diggle came forward, trotting his horse up to the base of the mound. The peons fingered their matchlocks and looked expectant; Bulger growled; but Desmond gazed serenely at his enemy.

"Your disguise is excellent," said Diggle in his smoothest tones; "but I believe I speak to Mr. Desmond Burke."

"Yes, Mr. Diggle," said Desmond, stepping forward.

"I am glad to have overtaken you. Sure you have encamped early. I have a message from my friend the Faujdar of Hugli. By some mistake a consignment of merchandise has been illegally removed from Cossimbazar, and the Faujdar, understanding that the goods are contained in these carts, bids me ask you to deliver them up to his men, whom you see here with me."

Desmond was anxious to gain time. He thought out his plan of action while Diggle was speaking. His impulsiveness prompted a flat defiance in few words; policy counselled a formality of utterance equal to Diggle's.

"These carts certainly contain merchandise, Mr. Diggle," he said. "It is the property of Mr. Edward Merriman, of Calcutta; I think you know him? It was removed from Cossimbazar; but not, I assure you, illegally. I have the dastaks authorizing its removal to Calcutta; they are signed by the Faujdar of Murshidabad. Has the Faujdar of--where did you say?"

"Of Hugli."

"Has the Faujdar of Hugli power to countermand what the Faujdar of the capital has done?"

"Why discuss that point?" said Diggle with a smile. "The Faujdar of Hugli is an officer of the Nawab; 'hoc sat est tibi'--blunt language, but the phrase is Tully's."

"Well, I waive that. But I am not satisfied that you, an Englishman, have authority to act for the Faujdar of Hugli. The crowd I see before me--a rabble of lathi-wallahs--clearly cannot be the Faujdar's men." At this point he heard an exclamation from Bulger. The second body of men had come up and ranked themselves behind the first. "And may I ask," added Desmond, with a slight gesture to Bulger to restrain himself; he too had recognized the new-comers; "since when the Nawab has taken into his service the crew of an interloping English merchantman?"

"I will give you full information, Mr. Burke," said Diggle suavely, "when we

stand together before my friend the Faujdar. In the meantime you will, if I may venture to advise, consult your interest best in yielding to superior numbers and delivering up the goods."

"And what about myself, Mr. Diggle?"

"You, of course, will accompany me to the Faujdar. He will be incensed, I make no doubt, at your temerity, and not unjustly; but I will intercede for you, and you will be treated with the most delicate attentions."

"You speak fair, Mr. Diggle," said Desmond, still bent upon gaining time; "but that is your way. What assurance have I that you will, this time, keep your word?"

"You persist in misjudging me," said Diggle regretfully. "As Cicero says in the play, you construe things after your fashion, clean from the purpose of the things themselves. My interest in you is undiminished; nay rather, it is increased and mixed with admiration. My offers still hold good: join hands with me, and I promise you that you shall soon be a *persona grata* at the court of Murshidabad, with wealth and honours in your grasp."

"Your offer is tempting, Mr. Diggle, to a poor adventurer like me, and if only my own interests were involved, I might strike a bargain with you. I have had such excellent reasons to trust you in the past! But the goods are not mine; they are Mr. Merriman's; and the utmost I can do at present is to ask you to draw your men off and wait while I send a messenger to Calcutta. When he returns with Mr. Merriman's consent to the delivery of the goods, then----"

The sentence remained unfinished. Diggle's expression had become blacker and blacker as Desmond spoke, and seeing with fury that he was being played with he suddenly wheeled round, and, cantering back to his men, gave the order to fire. At the same moment Desmond called to his men to lie flat on the ground and aim at the enemy from behind the thick wooden wheels of the hackeris. Being on the flat top of the mound, they were to some extent below the line of fire from the plain, and when the first volley was delivered no harm was done to them save for a few scratches made by flying splinters from the carts. But the crack of the matchlocks struck terror into the pale hearts of some of the hackeriwallahs. Several sprang over the breastwork and scuttled away like scared rabbits. The remainder stood firm, grasping their lathis in a manner that showed the fighting instinct to be strong, even in the Bengali.

Many anxious looks were bent upon Desmond, his men expecting the order to fire. But he bade them remain still, and through the interval between two carts he watched for the rush that was coming. The crew of the *Good Intent*, headed by Sunman the cross-eyed mate and Parmiter, had come up behind the natives. These having emptied their matchlocks were now retiring to reload. Diggle had dismounted, and was talking earnestly with the mate. They walked together to the

edge of the nullah, and looked up and down it, doubtless canvassing the chances of an attack in the rear; but the sides were steep; there was no hope of success in this direction; and they rejoined the main body.

Evidently they had decided on making a vigorous direct attack over the carts. Dividing his troop into two portions, Diggle put himself at the head of the one, Sunman at the head of the other. Arranged in a semicircle concentric with the breastwork, at the word of command all the men with firearms discharged their pieces; then, with shrill cries from the natives, and a hoarse cheer from the crew of the *Good Intent*, they charged in a close line up the slope. Behind the barricade the men's impatience had only been curbed by the quiet imperturbable manner of their young leader. But their self-restraint was on the point of breaking down when, short, sharp, and clear, the long-awaited command was given. Their matchlocks flashed; the volley told with deadly effect at the short range of thirty paces; four or five men dropped; as many more staggered down the slope; the rest halted indecisively, in doubt whether to push forward or turn tail.

"Blockheads! cowards!" shouted Diggle in a fury. "Push on, you dogs; we are four to one!"

He was now a very different Diggle from the man Desmond had known hitherto. His smile was gone; all languor and indolence was lost; his eyes flashed, his lips met in a hard cruel line; his voice rang out strong and metallic. That he was no coward Desmond already knew. He put himself in the forefront of the line, and, as always happens, a brave leader never lacks followers. The whole of the seamen and many of the Bengalis surged forward after him. Behind the breastwork all the men were now mixed up--musketeers with pikemen and lathi-wallahs. Upon these came the swarming enemy, some clambering over the carts, others wriggling between the wheels. There was a babel of cries; the exultant bellow of the born fighter, British or native; a few pistol-shots; the scream of the men mortally hit; the "Wah! wah!" of the Bengalis applauding their own prowess.

As Diggle had said, the odds were four to one. But the defenders had the advantage of position, and for a few moments they held the yelling mob at bay. The half-pikes of the boatmen were terrible weapons at close quarters, more formidable than the cutlasses of the seamen balked by the breastwork, or the loaded bamboo clubs of the lathiwallahs.

Sunman the mate was one of the first victims; he fell to a shot from Bulger. But Parmiter and Diggle, followed by half a dozen of the sailors, and a score of the more determined lathiwallahs and musketeers with clubbed muskets, succeeded in clambering to the top of the carts and prepared to jump down among the defenders, most of whom were busily engaged in jabbing at the men swarming in between the wheels. Desmond saw that if his barricade was once broken through the issue of the fight must be decided by mere weight of numbers.

"Bulger, here!" he cried, "and you, Hossain."

The men sprang to him, and, following his example, leapt on to the cart next to that occupied by Diggle and Parmiter. Desmond's intention was to take them in flank. Jumping over the bales of silk, he swung over his head a matchlock he had seized from one of his peons, and brought it down with a horizontal sweep. Two of the Bengalis among the crowd of lathiwallahs, who were hanging back out of reach of the boatmen's pikes, were swept off the cart. But the violence of his blow disturbed Desmond's own balance; he fell on one knee; his matchlock was seized and jerked out of his hand; and in a second three men were upon him. Bulger and the serang, although a little late owing to want of agility in scaling the cart, were close behind.

"Belay there!" roared Bulger, as he flung himself upon the combatants.

The bullet head of one sturdy badmash cracked like an egg-shell under the butt of the bold tar's musket; a second received the terrible hook square in the teeth; and a third, no other than Parmiter himself, was caught round the neck at the next lunge of the hook, and flung, with a mighty heave, full into the midst of the defenders. Bulger drew a long breath.

At the same moment Diggle, attacked by the serang, was thrown from his perch on the hackeri and fell among his followers outside the barricade. There was a moment's lull while both parties recovered their wind. Firing had ceased; to load a matchlock was a long affair, and though the attackers might have divided and come forward in relays with loaded weapons, they would have run the risk of hitting their own friends. It was to be again a hand-to-hand fight. Diggle was not to be denied. Desmond, who had jumped down inside the barricade when the pressure was relieved by Bulger, could not but admire the spirit and determination of his old enemy, though it boded ill for his own chance of escape. He was weary; worn out by want of rest and food; almost prostrated by the terrible heat. Looking round his little fort, he felt a tremor as he saw that five out of his twenty-four men were more or less disabled. True, there were now more than a dozen of the enemy in the same or a worse plight; but they could afford their losses, and Desmond indeed wondered why Diggle did not sacrifice a few men in one fierce overwhelming onslaught.

[image]

THE BATTLE OF THE CARTS.

"A hundred rupees to the man who kills the young sahib, two hundred to the man who takes him alive!" cried Diggle to his dusky followers, as though in

answer to Desmond's thought. Then, turning to the discomfited crew of the *Good Intent*, he said: "Sure, my men, you will not be beat by a boy and a one-armed man. There's a fortune for all of you in those carts. At them again, my men; I'll show you the way."

He was as good as his word. He snatched a long lathi from one of the Bengalis and rushed up the slope to the hacked nearest the nullah. Finding a purchase for one end of his club in the woodwork of the wagon, he put forth all his strength in the effort to push it over the edge. Owing to the length of the lathi he was out of reach of the half-pikes in the hands of the boatmen, who had to lunge either over or under the carts. His unaided strength would have been unequal to the task of moving the hackeri, heavily laden as it was, resting on soft soil, and interlocked with the next. But as soon as his followers saw the aim of his movements, and especially when they found that the defenders could not touch him without exposing themselves, he gained as many eager helpers as could brine their lathis to bear upon the two carts.

Meanwhile the defence at this spot was weak, for the men of the *Good Intent* had swarmed up to the adjoining carts and were threatening at any moment to force a way over the barricade. They were more formidable enemies than the Bengalis. Slowly the two hackeris began to move, till the wheels of one hung over the edge of the nullah. One more united heave, and it rolled over, dragging the other cart with it and splitting itself into a hundred fragments on the rocky bottom. Through the gap thus formed in the barricade sprang Diggle, with half a dozen men of the *Good Intent* and a score of Bengalis.

Desmond gathered his little band into a knot in the centre of the enclosure. Then the brazen sun looked down upon a Homeric struggle. Bulger, brawny warrior of the iron hook, swung his musket like a flail, every now and again shooting forth his more sinister weapon with terrible effect. Desmond, slim and athletic, dashed in upon the enemy with his half-pike as they recoiled before Bulger's whirling musket. The rest, now a bare dozen, Bengalis though they were, presented still an undaunted front to the swarm that surged into the narrow space. The hot air grew hotter with the fight.

To avoid being surrounded, the little band instinctively backed towards the edge of the nullah. Diggle exulted as they were pressed remorselessly to the rear. Not a man dreamt of surrender; the temper of the assailants was indeed so savage that nothing but the annihilation of their victims would now satisfy them. Yet Diggle once again bethought himself that Desmond might be worth to him more alive than dead, and in the midst of the clamour Desmond heard him repeat his offer of reward to the man who should capture him.

Diggle himself resolved to make the attempt. Venturing too near, he received an ugly gash from Desmond's pike, promising a permanent mark from

brow to chin. This was too much for him. Beside himself with fury, he yelled a command to his men to sweep the pigs over the brink, and, one side of his face livid with rage, the other streaming with blood, he dashed forward at Bulger, who had come up panting to engage him. He had well timed his rush, for Bulger's musket was at the far end of its pendulum swing; but the old seaman saw his danger in time. With a movement of extraordinary agility in a man of his bulk, he swung on his heel, presenting his side to the rapier that flashed in Diggle's hand. Parrying the thrust with his hook, he shortened his stump and lunged at Diggle below the belt. His enemy collapsed as if shot; but his followers swept forward over his prostrate body, and it seemed as if, in one brief half-minute, the knot of defenders would be hurled to the bottom of the nullah.

But, at this critical moment, assailants and defenders were stricken into quietude by a tumultuous cheer, the cheer of Europeans, from the direction of the gap in the barricade. Weapons remained poised in mid-air; every man stood motionless, wondering whether the interruption came from friend or foe. The question was answered on the instant.

"Now, men, have at them!"

With a thrill Desmond recognized the voice. It was the voice of Silas Toley. There was nothing of melancholy in it, nor in the expression of the New Englander as he sprang, cutlass in hand, through the gap. Slow to take fire, when Toley's anger was kindled it blazed with a devouring flame. The crowd of assailants dissolved as if by magic. Before the last of the crew of the *Hormuzzeer*, lascars and Europeans, had passed into the enclosure, the men of the *Good Intent* and their Bengali allies were streaming over and under the carts towards the open. Diggle at the first shock had staggered to his feet and stumbled towards the barricade. As he reached it, a black boy, springing as it were out of the earth, hastened to him and helped him to crawl between the wheels of a cart and down the slope. On the boy's arm he limped towards his horse, tethered to a tree. A wounded wretch was clumsily attempting to mount. Him Diggle felled; then he climbed painfully into the saddle and galloped away, Scipio Africanus leaping up behind.

By this time his followers were dispersing in all directions--all but eight luckless men who would never more wield cutlass or lathi, and a dozen who lay on one side or other of the barricade, too hard hit to move.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD

In which there are many moving events; and our hero finds himself a cadet of John Company.

Diggle's escape passed unnoticed until it was too late to pursue him. At the sight of Toley and his messmates of the *Hormuzzeer*, Bulger had let fall his musket and dropped to the ground, where he sat mopping his face and crying "Go it, mateys!" Desmond felt a strange faintness, and leant dizzily against one of the hackeris. But, revived by a draught from Mr. Toley's flask, he thanked the mate warmly, and wanted to hear how he had contrived to come up in time.

When Desmond's messenger arrived in Calcutta, Mr. Merriman was away up the river, engaged in very serious business. The messenger had applied to the Governor, to members of the Council, to Captain Minchin and other officers, and the reply of one and all was the same: they could do nothing; it was more important that every man should be employed in strengthening the defences of Calcutta than in going up-country on what might prove a vain and useless errand. But Toley happened to be in the town, and hearing of the difficulties and perils of his friend Burke, with the captain's consent he had hastily collected the crew of the *Hormuzzeer*, that still lay off the Fort, and led them, under the guidance of the messenger, to support him. Meeting Surendra Nath, and learning from him that a fight was imminent, he had pushed on with all speed, the Babu leading the way.

"It was well done," said Desmond warmly. "We owe our lives to you, and Mr. Merriman his goods. But what was the business that took Mr. Merriman from Calcutta at this time of trouble?"

"Trouble of his own, Burke," said Mr. Toley. "I guess he'd better have let the Nawab keep his goods and sent you to look after his women-folk."

"What do you mean? I left the ladies at Khulna; what has happened to them?"

"'Tis what Mr. Merriman would fain know. They've disappeared, gone clean out of sight."

"But the peons?"

"Gone too. Nothing heard or seen of them."

This serious news came as a shock to Desmond. If he had only known! How willingly he would have let Coja Solomon do what he pleased with the goods, and hastened to the help of the wife and daughter Mr. Merriman held so dear! While in Cossimbazar, he had heard from Mr. Watts terrible stories of the Nawab's villainy, which no respect of persons held in check. He feared that if Mrs. Merriman and Phyllis had indeed fallen into Siraj-uddaula's hands, they were lost to their family and friends for ever.

But, eager as he was to get back to Calcutta and join Mr. Merriman in

searching for them, he had a strange certainty that it was not to be. The faintness that he had already felt returned. His head was burning and throbbing; his ears buzzed; his limbs ached; his whole frame was seized at moments with paroxysms of shivering which no effort could control. Unknown to himself the seeds of malarial fever had found a lodgment in his system. While listening to Toley's story, he had reclined on the ground. When he tried to rise, he was overcome by giddiness and nausea.

"I am done up," he continued. "Mr. Toley, you must take charge and get these goods conveyed to Calcutta. Lose no time."

Surendra Nath recognized the symptoms of the disease, and immediately had a litter improvised for Desmond out of the linen covering of one of the carts and a couple of muskets. Mr. Toley at once made preparations for moving on with the convoy. The hackeriwallahs who had driven off the cattle had not gone far; they had waited in the hope of getting the bakshish promised them--if not from the young sahib, at least from the leader of the attacking party, which from its numbers they believed would gain the day. The oxen were soon yoked up. Mr. Toley would not wait to recover the loads of the carts that had toppled into the nullah, nor would he leave men for that purpose, lest another attack should be made on them from Hugli. He set off as soon as the teams were ready. Half an hour after they started, Bulger, walking beside the litter, saw to his dismay that Desmond had lost consciousness.

It was nearly a fortnight later when Desmond came to himself in his old bunk on board the *Hormuzzeer*. He was alone. Lying on his back, feebly trying to adjust his thoughts to his surroundings, he heard the faint boom of guns. What was happening? He tried to rise, but all power was gone from him; he could hardly lift an arm. Even the slight effort was too much for him, and he swooned again.

When he once more recovered consciousness, he saw a figure by his side. It was Mr. Toley. Again the distant thunder of artillery fell upon his ears.

"What is happening?" he asked, feebly.

"Almighty be praised!" said Toley fervently, "you're coming safe to port. Hush! Lie you still. You'll want nussin' like a babby. Never you heed the popguns; I'll tell you all about them when you're stronger. Food, sleep, and air; that's my catechism, larned from the surgeon. Bless you, Burke, I feared you was a done man."

With this Desmond had to be for the time content. But every day he heard firing, and every day, as he slowly regained strength, he became more and more anxious to know what it meant. Toley seemed to have left the ship; Desmond was tended only by natives. From them he learned that the Nawab was attacking

Calcutta. How were the defenders faring? They could not tell. He knew how small was the garrison, how weak the fortifications; but, with an English lad's unconquerable faith in his countrymen's valour, he could not believe that they could fail to hold their own.

One day, however, he heard no more firing. In the afternoon Mr. Toley came to his bunk, bringing with him Mr. Merriman himself. The merchant had his head bound up, and wore his left arm in a sling. He was pale, haggard, the shadow of his former self.

"What has happened, sir?" cried Desmond the instant he saw him. "Are the ladies safe?"

"God pity us, Desmond! I shall never see them again. My poor Dora! my sweet Phyllis! They are lost! All is lost! The Nawab has taken the Fort. We are beaten, shamed, ruined!"

"How did it happen? I heard the firing. Tell me; it cannot be so bad as that. Sure something can be done!"

"Nothing, nothing; we did all we could. 'Twas little; would that Drake had heeded our advice! But I am rejoiced to see you on the road to recovery, dear boy; 'twould have been another nail in my coffin to know that you had lost your life in doing a service for me. I thank God for that, from the bottom of my heart."

He pressed Desmond's hand affectionately.

"But tell me, sir; I want to know what has happened. How came you to be wounded? Sure I am strong enough to hear now; it will do me no harm."

"It cuts me to the heart, Desmond, but you shall know. I was absent when you were carried to my house--searching for my dear ones. But Dr. Gray tended you; alas! the good man is now a prisoner. I returned three days after, driven back from up the river by the advance of the Nawab's army. I was worn out, distraught; not a trace had I found of my dear wife; she had vanished; nor of my daughter; nor even of my peons; all had gone. And there was trouble enough in Calcutta, for me and for all. 'Twas the very day I returned that news came of Siraj-uddaula's approach. And a letter from his chief spy was intercepted, addressed to Omichand, bidding him escape while there was yet time and join the Subah. That seemed to Mr. Drake clear proof that Omichand was in league with our enemies, and he had him arrested and thrown into the Fort prison. But Mr. Drake never acts till 'tis too late. He gave orders next to arrest Krishna Das. The man barricaded himself in his house and beat our peons off, till Lieutenant Blagg and thirty Europeans drove in his gates. They found a vast quantity of arms collected there. They stormed Omichand's house also, where three hundred armed domestics made a stout fight against 'em. When our men got in--'tis a horrid story--the head jamadar with his own hands stabbed all his master's women and children, to prevent 'em falling into our hands, and then set fire to the place.

"Our men had already been driven out of Tanna fort by Manik Chand, who had come up with two thousand men and a couple of field-pieces. Then came up Mir Jafar, the Nawab's bakshi,[#] and began firing from the Chitpur gate. We got all our women into the Fort; the poor creatures left all they had but their clothes and their bedding. You may guess the confusion. The natives were flocking out of the town; most of our servants fled with them; all our cooks were gone, so that though we had a great stock of food we were like to starve in the midst of plenty. But we filled their places with some of the Portuguese who came crowding into the Fort. Two thousand of 'em, men, women, and children, filled the courtyard, sitting among their bundles of goods, so that we could scarce move for 'em. The enemy was in the town; they had set light to the Great Bazar, and were burning and plundering in the native parts. We fired the bastis[#] to the east and south, to deprive 'em of cover; and you may imagine the scene, Desmond--the blazing sky, the tears and screams of the women, the din of guns. We wrote to the French at Chandernagore begging 'em to lend us some ammunition, for the most of ours was useless; but they sent us a genteel reply saying they'd no more than sufficient for their own needs; yet the wretches made the Nawab a present of two hundred chests of powder, 'tis said.

[#] Commander-in-chief.

[#] Blocks of huts.

"Next day we were besieged in earnest. The Nawab had, we learnt, nigh 50,000 men, with 150 elephants and camels, and 250 Frenchmen working his artillery. Against 'em we had about 500 in all, only half of 'em Europeans. What could so few do against so many? Our officers were all brave enough, but they've had a slack time, and few of 'em are fit for their work. Ensign Picard, sure, did wonders, and Lieutenant Smyth defended the North battery with exceeding skill; but we had not men enough to hold our positions, and step by step we were driven back. 'Twas clear we could not hold out long, and on Friday night we held a council of war, and decided to send the women on board the ships in the river, to get 'em out of harm's way. Then by heaven! Desmond, two of the Council shamed 'emselves for ever. Mr. Manningham and Mr. Frankland, special friends of Mr. Drake, attended the ladies to the ship--'twas the *Dodalay*, of which they are owners--and they stayed on board with 'em--the cowards, to set such an infamous example! And well 'twas followed. 'Tis scarce credible, but Captain Minchin, our gallant commander, and Mr. Drake, our noble president, went down to the ghat and had 'emselves rowed off to the shipping and deserted us: good God! do they deserve

the name of Englishmen? One of our gentlemen standing on the steps was so enraged that he sent a bullet after the cravens; others did the same, and I would to heaven that one of their shots had took effect on the wretches! We made Mr. Holwell governor in the Quaker's place; and I tell you, Desmond, had we done so before, there would have been a different story to tell this day.

"Mr. Holwell saw 'twas impossible to withstand the Nawab's hordes much longer, and spoke for an orderly retreat; but he was overrid by some of the military officers; and besides, retreat was cut off, for the ships that had lain in the river moved away, and though we hung out signals from the Fort asking 'em to come back and take us off, they paid no heed; nay, they stood further off, leaving us to our fate. What could we do? Mr. Holwell sent to Omichand in his prison and offered to release him if he would treat with the Nawab for us. But the Gentoo refused. All he would do was to write a letter to Manik Chand asking him to intercede for us. Mr. Holwell threw the letter over the wall among the enemy, and by heaven! Desmond, never did I suppose Englishmen would be reduced to such a point of humiliation. But 'twas of no effect. The enemy came on with the more determination, and brought bamboos to scale the walls. We drove 'em off again, but with frightful loss; twenty-five of our bravest men were killed outright and sixty wounded. 'Twas there I got my wounds, and 'twould have been all over with me but for that fine fellow Bulger; he turned aside with his hook a slashing blow from a scimitar and gave my assailant his quietus. Bulger fought like a hero, and the very look of him, black with powder and stained with blood, seemed to drive all the fight out of the Moors that came his way.

"All this time the shots of the Nawab's cannon annoyed us, not to much harm, for they were most villainously served; their fire-arrows did us more mischief, flying into the thick of the crowds of screaming women and children. It made my heart sick to think of the poor innocent people suffering through the weakness and incompetence and the guilty neglect of our Council. The heat and the glare, the want of food, the uproar and commotion--may I never see or hear the like again!

"Yesterday there was a lull in the fighting about mid-day. The enemy were still outside the Fort, though they had possession of all the houses around. They showed a flag of truce, whereupon Mr. Holwell writ a letter asking 'em for terms. But 'twas a trick to deceive us. While we were resting, waiting the result of the parley, the Moors poured out of their hiding-places and swarmed upon the eastern gate of the Fort and the pallisadoes on the south-west. In the interval many of our common men had fallen asleep, some, alas! were drunk, so that we had no force to resist the invaders, who scaled the roof of the godowns on the north wall with the aid of their bamboos and swept over into the Fort.

"Most of us Europeans who were left collected in the veranda in front of the

barracks--you know, between the great gate and the south-east bastion. Scarce a man of us but was wounded. There we were unmolested, for the enemy, as soon as they burst into our private rooms, made busy with their spoil; and, as it appeared, the Nawab had given orders that we were to be spared. At five o'clock he came into the Fort in a gay litter and held a durbar in our Council room, Mir Jafar salaaming before him and making fulsome compliments on his great victory. Then the wretch sent for Mr. Holwell. We bade him farewell; sure we thought we should never see him more. But he returned to us presently, and told us the Nawab was vastly enraged at the smallness of the treasure he had found; the stories of the French had led him to expect untold wealth. Omichand and Krishna Das had been took out of prison, and treated with great affability, and presented by the Nawab with siropas--robes of honour, a precious token of his favour. But the Nawab, Mr. Holwell told us, had promised no harm should befall us. A guard of 500 gun-men was set over us with matches lighted, and the sun being now nigh setting, men came with torches, though sure they were not needed, a great part of the factory being in flames, so that indeed we feared we should be suffocated. But we were shortly afterwards told to go into the barracks, nigh the veranda where we stood. Then it was that I, by the mercy of God, was enabled to escape. I was at the end of the veranda, farthest from the barracks. Just as I was about to move off after the rest, one of the guards came in front of me, and whispered me to hide behind the last of the thick pillars till he came for me. I recognized the man: 'twas an old peon of mine. Thank God for a faithful servant! More dead than alive I did what he said. For hours I lay there, fearing I know not what, not daring to stir lest some eye should see me, and suffering agonies from my untended wounds. At last the man came to me. 'Sahib,' he said, 'you were good to me. I will save you. Come quickly.' I got up and stumbled after him. He led me by dark ways out of the Fort, past the new godown, across the burying-ground, down to Chandpal ghat. There I found Mr. Toley awaiting me with a boat, and 'tis thanks to my old peon and him I now find myself safe."

"And do you know what became of Bulger?" asked Desmond.

"He is with the rest, sorely battered, poor man."

"What will happen to the prisoners? How many are there?"

"There are nigh a hundred and fifty. The Nawab has promised they shall suffer no harm, and after a night in barracks I suppose he will let 'em go. We shall drop down the river till we reach the other vessels at Surman's, and then, by heaven! I shall see what I can do to bring Mr. Drake to a sense of his duty, and persuade him to come back and take off the Europeans. Sure this action of Siraj-uddaula's will not go unavenged. We have already sent letters to Madras, and within two months, I hope, succour will reach us from thence, and we shall chastise this insolent young Nawab."

"Do you think he will keep his word?--I mean, to do the prisoners no harm."

"I think so. He has done no harm to Mr. Watts, whom he brought with him from Cossimbazar; and our people will be more valuable to him alive than dead. Yes; by this time to-morrow I trust Mr. Holwell and the others will be safe on board the ships, and I do not envy Mr. Drake his bitter experience when the men he has deserted confront him."

While Mr. Merriman was telling his story, the *Hormuzzeer* was slowly drifting down the river. At Surman's garden, about five miles south of Calcutta, it joined the other vessels belonging to British owners, and dropped anchor. Several gentlemen came on board, eager to learn what had been the last scene in the tragic drama. Mr. Merriman told them all he knew, and every one drew a long breath of relief when they learnt that, though prisoners, Mr. Holwell and the gallant few who had stuck to their posts had been assured of good treatment. During the day the vessel dropped still lower down the river to Budge Budge, running the gauntlet of a brisk but ineffective fire from Tanna Fort, now in the hands of the Nawab's troops.

When the *Hormuzzeer* lay at anchor at Budge Budge, Mr. Merriman explained to Desmond the plans he had formed for him. The vessel now had her full cargo, and would sail immediately for Penang. Mr. Merriman proposed that Desmond should make the voyage. In his weak state the climate of Fulta, where the Europeans intended to stay until help reached them from Madras, might prove fatal to him; while the sea air would complete his cure.

His share of the sale-price of the *Tremukji*, together with the Gheria prize-money, amounted to more than a thousand pounds, and this had been invested for him by his friend.

"For myself," added Merriman, "I shall remain. My wounds are not severe; I am accustomed to the climate; and though India is now odious to me, I shall not leave Indian soil until I find traces of my dear wife and daughter. God grant that by the time you return I shall have some news of them."

Desmond would have liked to remain with the merchant, but he knew that in his weakness he could have done him no service, and he acquiesced in the arrangement.

That same evening the fugitives received news that made their blood run cold. Two Englishmen, Messrs. Cooke and Lushington, who had remained staunchly by Mr. Holwell's side, came from the shore in a small boat and boarded the *Dodalay*. Their appearance struck every one with amazement and horror. Mr. Cooke was a merchant, aged thirty-one; Mr. Lushington a writer in the Company's service, his age eighteen; but the events of one night had altered them almost beyond recognition. They said that when the order had been given to confine them in the barracks, the prisoners had all expected to pass the night in

comparative comfort. What was their amazement when they were escorted to the Black Hole, a little chamber no more than eighteen feet square, which was only used as a rule for the confinement of one or two unruly prisoners. In vain they protested; their brutal guards forced them, a hundred and forty-six in number, into the narrow space, and locked the door upon them. It was one of the hottest nights of the year; there was but one small opening in the wall, and before long the want of air and the intense heat drove the poor people to fury. They trampled each other down in their mad attempts to get near the opening for air and the water which one of their jailers, less brutal than the rest, handed in to them. The horror of the scenes that passed in that small room baffles description. In the agonies of thirst and suffocation the prisoners fought like tigers. Many prayed their guards to shoot them and end their sufferings, only to meet with jeers and laughter. Some of the native officers took pity on them and would have opened the door; but none durst move without the Nawab's permission, or brave his fury if they roused him from his sleep. From seven in the evening till six in the morning the agony continued, and when at length the order came for their release, only twenty-three of the hundred and forty-six tottered forth, the ghastliest wrecks of human beings. Mr. Holwell and three others were then conveyed as prisoners in a bullock-cart to Omichand's garden, and thence to Murshidabad; the rest were bidden to go where they pleased.

The news was kept from Desmond. It was not till weeks after that he heard of the terrible tragedy. Then, with the horror and pity he felt, there was mingled a fear that Bulger had been among those who perished. The seaman, he knew, had taken a stout part in the defence of the Fort; Mr. Merriman had not mentioned him as being among the prisoners; it was possible that he had escaped; but the thought that the brave fellow had perhaps died in that awful hole made Desmond sick at heart.

Though the season was now at its hottest, the fresh sea air proved a wonderful tonic to him, and he rapidly regained his strength. The voyage was slow. The *Hormuzzeer* beat down the Bay of Bengal against the monsoon now beginning, and it was nearly two months before she made Penang. She unloaded there: her cargo was sold at great profit, she being the only vessel that had for some time left the Hugli; and Desmond found his capital increased by nearly a hundred per cent. She then took on a cargo for Madras, where she arrived in the first week of September.

Desmond took the earliest opportunity of going on shore. The roads were studded with Admiral Watson's fleet, and he learnt that Clive was in the town preparing an expedition to avenge the wrong suffered by the English in Calcutta. He hastened to obtain an interview with the colonel.

"'Tis no conventional speech when I say I am glad to see you alive and well,

Mr. Burke," said Clive. "Have you come direct from Calcutta?"

"No, sir. I left there some ten weeks ago for Penang."

"Then I have later news of my friend Merriman than you. Poor fellow! He is distraught at the loss of his wife and girl. I have received several letters from him. He spoke of you; told me of what you had done at Cossimbazar. Gad, sir, you did right well in defending his goods; and I promise myself if ever I lay hands on that villain Peloti he shall smart for that piece of rascaldom and many more. Are you still minded to take service with me?"

"I should like nothing better, sir, but I doubt whether I can think of it until I see Mr. Merriman."

"Tut, man, that is unnecessary. 'Twas arranged between Mr. Merriman and me in Bombay that he would release you as soon as a vacancy occurred in the Company's military establishment. There are several such vacancies now, and I shall be glad to have a Shropshire man as a lieutenant. I trow you are not averse to taking a hand in this expedition?"

"No one who knows what happened in Calcutta can be that, sir."

"That is settled, then. I appoint you a cadet in the Company's service."

"Thank you indeed, sir," said Desmond, flushing with pleasure. "I have longed all my life to serve under you."

"You may find me a hard task-master," said Clive, setting his lips in the grim way that so many had cause to fear.

"When do we start, sir?"

"That I can't say. 'Tis not by my wish we have delayed so long. I will let you know when I require your services. Meanwhile, make yourself acquainted with the officers."

Desmond learnt from his new comrades that there was some disagreement among the Madras Council about the command of the expedition. Clive had volunteered to lead it as soon as the news of the fall of Calcutta arrived; but he was inferior in rank to Colonel Adlercron of the 39th Regiment, and that officer was a great stickler for military etiquette. The Council had some reason for anxiety. They might hear, at any moment, of the outbreak of war between France and England; and as the French were strong in Southern India, it required much moral courage to weaken the force disposable for the defence of Madras.

One day, before the matter of the command had been definitely settled, Desmond received a summons from Clive. He found the great soldier alone.

"You have heard of the discussions in the Council, Mr. Burke," began Clive without ceremony. "I tell you this: I and no other will command this expedition. In that confidence I have sent for you. What I have heard of you speaks well for your readiness and resource, and I think you could be more useful to me in the Hugli than waiting here until our respected Council can make up their minds. The

men here are not acquainted with Bengal. You are: you know the country, from Calcutta to Murshidabad, at all events, and you speak Hindustani with some fluency. You can serve me best by picking up any information you can get regarding the enemy's movements. You are willing, I take it, to run some risks?"

"I'll do anything you wish, sir."

"As I expected. Well, you will go at once to Fulta. Not to Mr. Drake: I've no confidence in him and the other old women who are conducting the Company's affairs in Bengal. Major Killpatrick, an excellent officer, left here in June with a small reinforcement. He is now at Fulta. You will join him. I will ask him to give you a free hand in going and coming and collecting information. You understand that in a sense you are on secret service. I want you to keep an eye particularly on the movements of the French. 'Tis reported that they are in league with Sirajuddaula: find out whether that's the case: and gad, sir, if it is, I'll not be satisfied till I've turned 'em neck and crop out of Bengal. You'll want money: here are 5,000 rupees; if you want more, ask Major Killpatrick. Now, when can you start?"

"The *Hormuzzeer* is sailing in ballast to-morrow, sir. She'll go light, and aboard her I should get to Fulta as quickly as on any other vessel."

"Very well. I trust you: much depends on your work; go on as you have begun and I promise you Robert Clive won't forget it. Good-bye.--By the way, your duties will take you through the parts where Mrs. Merriman disappeared. Your first duty is to me, and through me to your King and country, remember that. But if you can get any news of the missing ladies, so much the better. Mrs. Merriman is a cousin of my wife, and I am deeply concerned about her fate."

Next day the *Hormuzzeer* sailed, and by the middle of September Desmond had reached Fulta, and reported himself both to Major Killpatrick and to Mr. Merriman there.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH

In which the danger of judging by appearance is notably exemplified.

"Sure 'tis a most pleasant engaging young man," said Mrs. Merriman, as her boat dropped down the river towards Chandernagore. "Don't you think so, Phyllis?"

"Why, mamma, it does seem so. But 'tis too soon to make up my mind in

ten minutes."

"Indeed, miss! Let me tell you I made up my mind about your father in five. La, how Merriman will laugh when he hears 'twas Mr. Burke gave him that scar!--What is the matter, Munnoo Khan?"

The boat had stopped with a jerk, and the boatmen were looking at one another with some anxiety. The serang explained that ill luck had caused the boat to strike a snag in the river, and she was taking in water.

"You clumsy man! The Sahib will be angry with you. Make haste, then; row harder."

"Mamma, 'tis impossible!" cried Phyllis in alarm, "See, the water is coming in fast; we shall be swamped in a few minutes!"

"Mercy me, 'tis as you say! Munnoo Khan, row to the nearest ghat: you see it there! Sure 'tis a private ghat, belonging to the house of one of the French merchants. He will lend us a boat. 'Twill be vastly annoying if we do not reach home to-night."

The men just succeeded in reaching the ghat, on the left bank of the river about a mile below Chandernagore, before the boat sank. When the party had landed, Mrs. Merriman sent her jamadar up to the house to ask for the loan of a boat, or for shelter while one was being obtained from Chandernagore.

"Tell the Sahib 'tis the bibi of an English sahib," she said. "He will not refuse to do English ladies a service."

The jamadar shortly returned, followed by a tall dark-featured European in white clothes. He bowed and smiled pleasantly when he came down to the ghat, and addressed Mrs. Merriman in French.

"I am happy to be of service, madam. Alas! I have no boat at hand, but I will send instantly to Chandernagore for one. Meanwhile, if you will have the goodness to come to my house, my wife will be proud to offer you refreshments, and we will do our best to entertain you until the boat arrives. Permit me, madam."

He offered his left hand to assist the lady up the steps.

"I had the mischance to injure my right hand the other day," he explained. "It is needful to keep it from the air."

It was thrust into the pocket of his coat.

"The Frenchman is vastly polite," said Mrs. Merriman to her daughter, as they preceded him up the path to the house. "But there, that is the way with their nation."

"Hush, mamma!" said Phyllis, "he may understand English. I do not like his smile," she added in a whisper.

"La, my dear, it means nothing; it comes natural to a Frenchman. He looks quite genteel, you must confess; I should not be surprised if he were a somebody in his own land."

As if in response to the implied question, the man moved to her side, and, in a manner of great deference, said--

"Your jamadar named you to me, madam; I feel that I ought to explain who I am. My name is Jacques de Bonnefon--a name, I may say it without boasting, once even better known at the court of His Majesty King Louis the Fifteenth than in Chandernagore. Alas, madam! fortune is a fickle jade. Here I am now, in Bengal, slowly retrieving by honest commerce a patrimony of which my lamented father was not too careful."

"There! What did I say?" whispered Mrs. Merriman to her daughter as Monsieur de Bonnefon went forward to meet them on the threshold of his veranda. "A noble in misfortune! I only hope his wife is presentable."

They entered the house and were shown into a room opening on the veranda.

"You will pardon my leaving you for a few moments, mesdames," said their obliging host. "I will bring my wife to welcome you, and send to Chandernagore for a boat."

With a bow he left them, closing the door behind him.

"Madame de Bonnefon was taken by surprise, I suppose," said Mrs. Merriman, "and is making her toilet. The vanity of these French people, my dear!"

Minutes passed. Evening was coming on apace; little light filtered through the jhilmils. The ladies sat, wondering why their hostess did not appear.

"Madame takes a long time, my dear," said Mrs. Merriman.

"I don't like it, mamma. I wish we hadn't come into the stranger's house."

"Why, my love, what nonsense! The man is not a savage. The French are not at war with us, and if they were, they do not war with women. Something has happened to delay Monsieur de Bonnefon."

"I can't help it, mamma; I don't like his looks; I fear something, I don't know what. Oh, I wish father were here!"

She got up and walked to and fro restlessly. Then, as by a sudden impulse, she went quickly to the door and turned the handle. She gave a low cry under her breath, and sprang round.

"Mamma! mamma!" she cried. "I knew it! The door is locked."

Mrs. Merriman rose immediately.

"Nonsense, my dear! He would not dare do such a thing!"

But the door did not yield to her hand, though she pulled and shook it violently.

"The insolent villain!" she exclaimed. She had plenty of courage, and if her voice shook, it was with anger, not fear. She went to the window opening on the veranda, loosed the bars, and looked out.

"We can get out here," she said. "We will go instantly to Chandernagore,

and demand assistance from the Governor."

But the next moment she shrank back into the room. Two armed peons stood in the veranda, one on each side of the window. Recovering herself Mrs. Merriman went to the window again.

"They will not dare to stop us," she said. "Let me pass, you men; I will not be kept here."

But the natives did not budge from their post. Only, as the angry lady flung open one of the folding doors, they closed together and barred the way with their pikes. Accustomed to absolute subservience from her own peons, Mrs. Merriman saw at once that insistence was useless. If these men did not obey instantly they would not obey at all.

"I cannot fight them," she said, again turning back. "The wretches! If only your father were here!"

"Or Mr. Burke," said Phyllis. "Oh, how I wish he had come with us!"

"Wishing is no use, my dear. I vow the Frenchman shall pay dearly for this insolence. We must make the best of it."

Meanwhile Monsieur de Bonnefon had gone down to the ghat. But he did not send a messenger to Chandernagore as he had promised. He told the jamadar, in Urdu, that his mistress and the chota bibi would remain at his house for the night. They feared another accident if they should proceed in the darkness. He bade the man bring his party to the house, where they would all find accommodation until the morning.

In the small hours of that night there was a short sharp scuffle in the servants' quarters. The Merriman boatmen and peons were set upon by a score of sturdy men who promptly roped them together and, hauling them down to the ghat and into a boat, rowed them up to Hugli.

There they were thrown into the common prison. In the morning a charge of dacoity[#] was laid against them. The story was that they had been apprehended in the act of breaking into the house of Monsieur Sinfray. Plenty of witnesses were forthcoming to give evidence against them; such can be purchased outside any cutcherry[#] in India for a few rupees. The men were convicted. Some were given a choice between execution and service in the Nawab's army; others were sentenced off-hand to a term of imprisonment, and these considered themselves lucky in escaping with their lives. In vain they protested their innocence and pleaded that a messenger might be sent to Calcutta; the Nawab was known to be so much incensed against the English that the fact of their being Company's servants availed them nothing.

[#] Gang robbery.

[#] Court-house.

About the same time that the men were being condemned, a two-ox hackeri, such as was used for the conveyance of pardahnishin[#] women, left the house of Monsieur de Bonnefon and drove inland for some five miles. The curtains were closely drawn, and the people who met it on the road wondered from what zenana the ladies thus screened from the public gaze had come. The team halted at a lonely house surrounded by a high wall, once the residence of a zamindar, now owned by Coja Solomon of Cossimbazar, and leased to a fellow Armenian of Chandernagore. It had been hired more than once by Monsieur Sinfray, the Secretary to the Council at Chandernagore and a *persona grata* with the Nawab, for *al fresco* entertainments got up in imitation of the fêtes at Versailles. But of late Monsieur Sinfray had had too much important business on hand to spare time for such delights. He was believed to be with Siraj-uddaula at Murshidabad, and the house had remained untenanted.

[#] Literally, sitting behind screens.

The hackeri pulled up at the gate in the wall. The curtains were drawn aside; a group of peons surrounded the cart to fend off prying eyes; and the passengers descended--two ladies clad in long white saris[#] and closely veiled. A sleek Bengali had already got out from a palanquin which had accompanied the hackeri; in a second palanquin sat Monsieur de Bonnefon, who did not take the trouble to alight. With many salaams the Bengali led the ladies through the gate and across the compound towards the house. They both walked proudly erect, with a gait very different from that of the native ladies who time and again had followed the same path. They entered the house; the heavy door was shut; and from behind the screens of the room to which they were led they heard the hackeri rumbling away.

[#] Garment in one piece, covering the body from head to foot.

Monsieur de Bonnefon, as his palanquin was borne off, soliloquized, ticking off imaginary accounts on the fingers of his left hand; the right hand was partly hidden by a black velvet mitten. His reckoning ran somewhat as follows--

"In account with Edward Merriman--

"Credit--to the hounding out of the Company by his friend Clive: nominal: I made more outside; to scurrilous abuse in public and private: mere words--say fifty rupees; to threat to hang me: mere words again--say fifty rupees. Total credit,

say a hundred rupees.

"Debit--to ransom for wife and daughter: two lakhs.

"Balance in my favour, say a hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred rupees.

"In a few weeks, Mr. Edward Merriman, I shall trouble you for a settlement."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH

In which our hero embarks on a hazardous mission; and Monsieur Sinfray's khansaman makes a confession.

On arriving at Fulta Desmond found that the European fugitives from Calcutta were living for the most part on board the country ships in the river, while the military were cantoned in huts ashore, on a plain eastward of the town. The avenues leading to their camp were occupied by sepoys. Desmond lost no time in making his way to Major Killpatrick's hut and presenting his credentials.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance," said the major heartily. "Oh yes, I know all about you. Mr. Merriman has told me of the way you brought his cargo through from Cossimbazar, and the plucky stand you made against odds. By Jove, sir, 'twas an amazing good piece of work. You deserved a commission if any youngster ever did, and I'm glad Mr. Clive has done the right thing. Let me tell you, Mr. Clive don't make mistakes--in military matters, that is to say. And Gheria, now: egad, sir, you must have a head on your shoulders; and that en't flattery; we soldiers en't in the habit of laying on the butter. You did well; and sure you'll be of the greatest use to us here. We need a few men as are able to keep their heads in a warm place: and, begad, if they'd had such men in Bengal these last months we wouldn't be rotting here in this fever-haunted place. Why, I've lost thirty-two officers and men in less than a couple of months, and I'll be lucky if I've fifty fit for service by the time Mr. Clive arrives. When may we expect him, sir?"

"He couldn't tell me, sir. The Madras Council can't make up their minds who is to command the expedition, and they're waiting for ships from home."

Major Killpatrick laughed.

"Why, I know how that will end. With Mr. Stringer Lawrence laid up there is

only one man fit to do this job, and that's Mr. Clive, and the sooner the gentlemen on their office stools at Madras see that, the better in the end for everybody. Now you're strong again, eh? Got rid of that touch of fever?"

"Yes, sir; I'm as well as ever."

"And want to be doing something, I'll be bound. Well, 'twill need some thinking, what you're to do. We're badly served with news. We've got spies, of course; but I don't set much store by native spies in this country. We've information by the bushel, but when you come to sift it out there's precious little of it you can trust. And the enemy has got spies too--hundreds of 'em. I'll bet my boots there's a regular system of kasids for carrying news of us to Manik Chand and from him to the Nawab. If the truth was known, I daresay that rascal knows how many hairs I have on my bald crown under my wig--if that's any interest to him. Well, I suppose you'll join Mr. Merriman on board one of the ships. Better chance of escaping the fever there. I'll turn over a thing or two I have in my mind and send for you when I've done turning."

On the way back to the shore Desmond met the serang who had accompanied him down the river from Cossimbazar. The man explained that after the capture of Calcutta his brother Hubbo, the Company's syr serang,[#] had been impressed into the service of the Nawab, and he himself had been sent by Hubbo to Fulta to assist the Council and merchants of the Company. He had there met Mr. Merriman, whom in common with many others he had believed to be dead. Mr. Merriman, having no immediate need for his services, had willingly permitted him to take his brother's place in the employment of the Company.

[#] Head boatman.

Mr. Merriman welcomed Desmond with quite fatherly affection, and congratulated him heartily on his appointment. The *Hormuzzeer* being unlikely, owing to the complete cessation of trade, to make another voyage for some months to come, he decided to take up his quarters on board, and Desmond lived with him as a matter of course. Desmond was shocked to see the change wrought on his friend by the loss of his wife and daughter. All his gay spirits had left him; he had thinned perceptibly, and his eyes had that strained look which only a great sorrow can cause.

"I have been thinking it over, Desmond," he said as they sat in the cabin, "and I can only conclude that this is one more of Peloti's villainies. Good God! had he not done me and mine harm enough? Who else would be so dead to all sense of right, of decency, as to seize upon two helpless women? My brother was

hanged, Desmond; hanging is too good for that scoundrel; but we cannot touch him; he laughs at us; and I am helpless--helpless!"

"Like you, sir, I have come to believe that you owe this terrible sorrow to Diggle--I must always call him that. Don't give up heart, sir. What his motive is, if he has indeed captured the ladies, I cannot tell. It may be to use them as hostages in case he gets into trouble with us; it is impossible to see into the black depths of his mind. But I believe the ladies are safe, and, please God, I will learn something about them and maybe bring them back to you."

Desmond waited a couple of days in the hope of receiving a definite task from Major Killpatrick. But that officer, while an excellent soldier, was not fertile in expedients. The process of "turning things over in his mind" did not furnish him with an inspiration. He came on board the *Hormuzzeer* one afternoon, and confessed that he didn't see how Desmond could possibly get up and down the river. Mr. Merriman reminded him that in the early days of the stay at Fulta, Mr. Robert Gregory had gone up with requests to the French and Dutch for assistance. Under cover of a storm he passed Tanna and Calcutta unnoticed by the Nawab's men.

"The French were very polite, but wouldn't move a finger for us," added Mr. Merriman. "The Dutch were more neighbourly, and sent us some provisions--badly needed, I assure you. Mr. Gregory is still with them at Chinsura."

"If he got through, why shouldn't I?" asked Desmond.

"My dear boy," said Killpatrick, "the river is narrowly watched. The Moors know that Gregory outwitted them; sure no other Englishman could repeat the trick. And if you were caught, there's no saying how Manik Chand might serve you. He seems disposed to be friendly, to be sure: he's made governor of Calcutta now, and wants to feel his feet. But he's a weak man, by all accounts; and weak men, when they are afraid, are always cruel. If he caught an Englishman spying out the land he'd most probably treat him after Oriental methods. In fact, the situation between him and us is such," concluded the major with a laugh, "that he'd be quite justified in stringing you up."

Major Killpatrick left without offering any suggestion. When he had gone Desmond spent an hour or two in "turning things over in his mind." He felt that the major was well disposed and would probably jump at any reasonable scheme that was put before him. After a period of quiet reflection he sought out Hossain the serang and had a long talk with him. At the conclusion of the interview he went to see Mr. Merriman. He explained that Hossain wished to return to the service of a former employer, a native grain merchant in Calcutta, who did a large trade along the Hugli from the Sanderbands to Murshidabad. The consent of the Council was required, and Desmond wished Mr. Merriman to arrange the matter without giving any explanation. The merchant was naturally anxious to know

why Desmond interested himself in the man, and what he learnt drew from him an instant promise to obtain the Council's consent without delay. Then Desmond made his way to Major Killpatrick's hut, and remained closeted with that genial officer till a late hour.

Six weeks later a heavily laden petala, with a dinghy trailing behind, was dropping down the river above Hugli. Its crew numbered four. One was Hossain the serang, who had left Fulta with Desmond on the day after his interview with Major Killpatrick. Two were dark-skinned boatmen, Bengalis somewhat stupid in appearance. The fourth, who was steering, was rather lighter in hue, as well as more alert and energetic in mien: a lascar, as Hossain explained in answer to inquiries along the river. He had lately been employed on one of the Company's vessels, but it had been sunk in the Hugli during the siege of Calcutta. He was a handy man in a boat, and very glad to earn a few pice in this time of stagnant trade. Things were not looking bright for boatmen on the Hugli; as only a few vessels had left the river from Chandernagore and Chinsura since the troubles began, there was little or no opening for men of the shipwrecked crew.

The petala made fast for the night near the bank, at a spot a little below Hugli, between that place and Chinsura. When the two Bengalis had eaten their evening rice, Hossain told them that they might, if they pleased, take the dinghy and attend a tamasha[#] that was being held in Chinsura that night in honour of the wedding of one of the Dutch Company's principal gumashtas. The Bengalis, always ready for an entertainment of this kind, slipped overboard and were soon rowing down to Chinsura. Their orders were to be back immediately after the second watch of the night. Only the lascar and Hossain were left in the boat.

[#] Entertainment.

Ten minutes after the men had disappeared from view, the serang lit a small oil-lamp in the tiny cabin. He then made his way to the helm, whispered a word in the lascar's ear, and took his place. The latter nodded and went into the cabin. Drawing the curtains, he squatted on a mattress, took from a hiding-place in the cabin a few sheets of paper and a pencil, and, resting the paper on the back of a tray, began to write. As he did so he frequently consulted a scrap of paper he kept at his left hand; it was closely covered with letters and figures, these latter not Hindustani characters, but the Arabic figures employed by Europeans. The first line of what he wrote himself ran thus--

29 19 28 19 36 38 32 20 31 39 23 34 19 29 29 35 32 38 24 38 23 32

[#] Constructed from the cipher used by Mr. Watts at Murshidabad. [Transcriber's note: there was no footnote reference in the source book for this footnote.]

The letter or message upon which he was engaged was not a lengthy one, but it took a long time to compose. When it was finished the lascar went over it line by line, comparing it with the paper at his left hand. Then he folded it very small, sealed it with a wafer, and, returning to the serang, said a few words. Hossain made a trumpet of his hands, and, looking towards the left bank, sounded a few notes in imitation of a bird's warble. The shore was fringed here with low bushes. As if in answer to the call a small boat darted out from the shelter of a bush; a few strokes brought it alongside of the petala; and the serang, bending over, handed the folded paper to the boatman, and whispered a few words in his ear. The man pushed off, and the lascar watched the boat float silently down the stream until it was lost to sight.

Dawn was hardly breaking when Major Killpatrick, awakened by his servant, received from his hands a folded paper which by the aid of a candle he began to pore over, laboriously comparing it with a small code similar to that used by the lascar. One by one he pencilled on a scrap of paper certain letters, every now and then whistling between his teeth as he spelt out the words they made. The result appeared thus--

Magazines for ammunition and stores of grain being prepared Tribeni and Hugli. Bazar rumour Nawab about to march with army to Calcutta. Orders issued Hugli traffic to be strictly watched. Dutch phataks[#] closed. Forth unable leave Chinsura. Tanna Fort 9 guns; opposite Tanna 6 guns; Holwell's garden 5 guns; 4 each Surman's and Ganj; 2 each Mr. Watts' house, Seth's ghat, Maryas ghat, carpenter's yard.

[#] Gate or barrier.

"Egad!" he exclaimed, on a second reading of the message, "the boy's a conjurer. This is important enough to send to Mr. Clive at once. But I'll make a copy of it first in case of accident."

Having made his copy and sealed the original and his first transcription, he summoned his servant and bade him send for the kasid. To him he entrusted the papers, directing him to convey them without loss of time to Clive Sahib, whom he might expect to find at Kalpi.

It was December 13. Two months before, the fleet containing Colonel Clive and the troops destined for the Bengal expedition had sailed from Madras. The force consisted of 276 King's troops, 676 of the Company's, about a thousand sepoys, and 260 lascars. They were embarked on five of the King's ships, with Admiral Watson in the *Kent*, and as many Company's vessels. Baffling winds, various mishaps, and the calms usual at this time of the year had protracted the voyage, so seriously that the men had to be put on a two-thirds allowance of rations. Many of the European soldiers were down with scurvy, many of the sepoys actually died of starvation, having consumed all their rice, and refusing to touch the meat provided for the British soldiers, for fear of losing caste. When the Admiral at length arrived at Fulta, he had only six of the ten ships with which he started, two that had parted company arriving some ten days later, and two being forced to put back to Madras, under stress of weather.

While the *Kent* lay at Kalpi, Clive received the message sent him by Major Killpatrick, and was visited by Mr. Drake and other members of the Council, from whom he heard of the sickness among the troops. On arriving at Fulta he at once went on shore and visited the Major.

"Sorry to hear of your sad case, Mr. Killpatrick," he said. "We're very little better off. But we must make the best of it. I got your note. 'Twas an excellent greeting. Young Burke is a capital fellow; I have not mistook his capacity."

"Faith, 'twas what I told him, sir. I said Colonel Clive never mistook his men."

"Well, if that's true, what you said won't make him vain. This information is valuable: you see that. Have you heard anything more from the lad?"

"Nothing, sir."

"And you can't communicate with him?"

"No, 'twas his scheme only to send messages; to receive them would double the risk."

"So: 'twas his scheme, not yours?"

"Egad, sir, I've no head for that sort of thing," said Killpatrick with a laugh. "Give me a company, and a wall to scale or a regiment to charge, and----"

"My dear fellow," interrupted Clive, "we all know the King has no better officer. Credit where credit is due, major, and you're not the man to grudge this youngster his full credit for an uncommonly daring and clever scheme. Did you see him in his disguise?"

"I did, sir, and at a distance he took in both Mr. Merriman and myself."

"Well, he's a boy to keep an eye on, and I only hope that tigers or dacoits or the Nawab's Moors won't get hold of him; he's the kind of lad we can't spare. Now, let me know the state of your troops."

When he had sent off his note to Major Killpatrick, Desmond enjoyed a short spell on deck preparatory to turning in. Hossain was placidly smoking his hubble-bubble; from the far bank of the Hugli came the mingled sounds of tom-toms and other instruments; near the boat all was quiet, the wavelets of the stream lapping idly against the sides, the stillness broken only by the occasional howl of a jackal prowling near the bank in quest of the corpses of pious Hindus consigned to the sacred waters of the Ganges.

Desmond was half dozing when he was startled into wakefulness by a sudden clamour from the native town. He heard shots, loud cries, the hideous blare of the Bengal trumpets. For half an hour the shouts continued intermittently; then they gradually died away. Wondering whether the tamasha had ended in a tumult, Desmond was about to seek his couch when, just beneath him, as it seemed, he heard a voice--a feeble cry for help. He sprang up and looked over the side. Soon a dark head appeared on the water. With a cry to the serang to cast loose and row after him, Desmond took a header into the stream, and in a few strokes gained the drowning man's side. He was clearly exhausted. Supporting him with one arm, Desmond struck out with the other, and being a strong swimmer he reached the stern of the boat even before the serang had slipped his moorings. With Hossain's aid he lifted the man into the boat, and carried him to the cabin. He was all but unconscious. A mouthful of arrack[#] from the serang's jar revived him. No sooner was he in command of his breath than he implored his rescuers for their help and protection. He had escaped, he said, from Hugli Fort, not without a gun-shot wound behind his shoulder. He spoke in Bengali. Seeing that he was too much exhausted and agitated to tell his story that night, Desmond bade the serang assure him of his safety. Then they made shift to tend his wound, and, comforting him with food and drink, left him to sleep and recover.

[#] A fermented liquor made from rice or the juice of the palm.

The two Bengalis who had been to Chinsura returned before they were expected. They had been alarmed by the uproar. As soon as they were aboard Desmond decided to drop a mile or two farther down the river. The boat coming to a ghat below Chandernagore, the serang ordered the men to pull in, and tied up for the rest of the night.

In the morning the Bengalis were despatched on some errand along the bank, and the coast being clear Desmond went with the serang to the wounded man to learn particulars of his escape. The Bengali had now almost wholly recovered, and was very voluble in his gratitude for his rescue. While he was speak-

ing the boat slightly shifted her position, and the Bengali suddenly caught sight, through the matting, of a large house beyond the ghat. He uttered an exclamation of fear, and begged the serang with frantic waving of the hands to leave the spot at once.

"Why, O brother, this fear?" asked Hossain.

"I will tell you. It is a great fear. Just before the coming of the rains I was at Khulna. There I was hired by the head serang of a lady travelling to Calcutta. She was the wife of a burra sahib of the great Company, and with her was her daughter. All went well until we came near Chandernagore; we struck a snag; the boat sprang a leak; we feared the bibis would be drowned. We rowed to this very ghat; a sahib welcomed the ladies; they went into his house yonder. Presently he sent for us; we lodged with his servants; but in the night we were set upon, bound, and carried to Hugli. False witnesses accused us of being dacoits; we were condemned; and I was confined with others in the prison.

"Always since then have I looked for a chance of escape. It came at last. Some of the jailers went last night to the tamasha at Chinsura. I stole out and got away. A sentry fired upon me, and hit me; but I am a good swimmer and I plunged into the river. You know all that happened then, O serang, and I beseech you leave this place; it is a dreadful place; some harm will come to us all."

Desmond's knowledge of Bengali was as yet slight, and he caught only portions of the man's narrative. But he understood enough to convince him that he was at last on the track of the missing ladies; and when, shortly afterwards, Hossain gave him in Urdu the whole of the story, he determined at once to act on the information. On the return of the two Bengalis, he arranged with the serang to set them at work on some imaginary repairs to the boat: that pretext for delay was as good as another. Then, Hossain having reassured the fugitive, he himself landed and made his way up to the house.

It was closed. There was no sign of its being inhabited. But about a hundred yards from the gate Desmond saw a basti, and from one of the huts smoke was issuing. He sauntered up. Before the door, lolling in unstudied deshabille, squatted a bearded Mohammedan, whom from his rotundity Desmond guessed to be the khansaman of the big house.

"Salaam aleikam,[#] khansaman!" said Desmond suavely. "Pardon the curiosity of an ignorant sailor from Gujarat. What nawab owns the great house yonder?"

[#] Peace be with you!

The khansaman, beaming in acknowledgment of the implied compliment to his own importance, replied:

"To Sinfray Sahib, worthy khalasi."

"The great Sinfray Sahib of Chandernagore? Surely that is a strange thing!"

"Strange! What is strange? That Sinfray Sahib should own so fine a house? You should see his other house in Chandernagore: then indeed you might lift your eyes in wonder."

"Nay, indeed, I marvelled not at that, for Sinfray Sahib is indeed a great man. We who dwell upon the kala pani know well his name. Is it not known in the bazars in Pondicherry and Surat? But I marvel at this, khansaman: that on one day, this day of my speaking to you, I should meet the sahib's most trusty servant, as I doubt not you are, and also the man who has sworn revenge upon the owner of this house--ay, and on all the household."

"Bismillah!"[#] exclaimed the khansaman, spitting out his supari. He was thoroughly interested, but as yet unconcerned. "What do you mean, khalasi?"

[#] "In the name of Allah!"--a common exclamation.

"I parted but now, on the river, from a fellow-boatman who of late has lain in prison at Hugli, put there, they say, by order of Sinfray Sahib. He is not a dacoit; no man less so; but false witnesses rose up against him. And, I bethink me, he said that the sahib's khansaman was one of these men with lying lips. Surely he was in error; for your face, O khansaman, is open as the sun, your lips are fragrant with the very attar of truth. But he is filled with rage and fury; in his madness he will not tarry to inquire. If he should meet you--well, it is the will of Allah: no man can escape his fate."

The khansaman, as Desmond spoke, looked more and more distressed; and at the last words his face was livid.

"It is not true," he said. "But I know the blind fury of revenge. Do thou entreat him for me. I will pay thee well. I have saved a few pice.[#] It will be worth five rupees to thee; and to make amends to the madman, I will give him fifty rupees, even if it strips me of all I have. Allah knows it was not my doing; it was forced upon me."

[#] Coin, value one-eighth of a penny.

"How could that be, khansaman?" said Desmond, letting pass the man's contradictory statements.

"It is not necessary to explain; my word is my word."

"No doubt; but so enraged is the khalasi I speak of that unless I can explain to him fully he will not heed me. Never shall I dissuade him from his purpose."

"It is the will of Allah!" said the khansaman resignedly. "I will tell you. It was not Sinfray Sahib at all. He was at the Nawab's court at Murshidabad. He had lent his house to a friend while he was absent. The friend had a spite against Merriman Sahib, the merchant at Calcutta; and when the bibi and the chota bibi came down the river he seized them. Sinfray Sahib believes there was an attack by dacoits; but the bibi's peons were carried away by the sahib's friend: it was he that brought the evidence against them. The Angrezi sahib induced me to swear falsely by avouching that Sinfray Sahib was also an enemy of Merriman Sahib; but when the judge had said his word the sahib bade me keep silence with my master, for he was ignorant of it all. The Angrezi sahib is a terrible man: what could I do? I was afraid to speak."

"And what was the name of the Angrezi sahib?"

"His name?--It was Higli--no, Digli Sahib--accursed be the day I first saw him!"

Desmond drew a long breath.

"And what became of the bibi and the chota bibi?"

"They were taken away."

"Whither?"

"I do not know."

The answer was glib; Desmond thought a little too glib.

"Why then, khansaman," he said, "I fear it would be vain for me to reason with the man I spoke of. He has eaten the salt of Merriman Sahib; his lord's injury is his also. But you acted for the best. Allah hafiz! that will be a morsel of comfort even if this man's knife should find its way between your ribs. Not every dying man has such consolation. Live in peace, good khansaman."

Desmond, who had been squatting in the Oriental manner--an accomplishment he had learnt with some pains at Gheria--rose to leave. The khansaman's florid cheeks again put on a sickly hue, and when the seeming lascar had gone a few paces he called him back.

"Ahi, excellent khalasi! I think--I remember--I am almost sure I can discover where the two bibis are concealed."

"Inshallah![#] That is indeed fortunate," said Desmond, turning back. "There lies the best chance of averting the wrath of this much-wronged man."

[#] "Please God!"--a common exclamation.

"Wait but a little till I have clad myself duly; I will then go to a friend yonder and inquire."

He went into his hut and soon returned clothed in the garments that befitted his position. Walking to a hut at the end of the block, he made pretence, Desmond suspected, of inquiring. He was soon back.

"Allah is good!" he said. "The khitmatgar yonder tells me they were taken to a house three coss[#] distant, belonging to the great faujdar Manik Chand. It is rented from him by Digli Sahib, who is a great friend of his excellency."

[#] The coss is nearly two miles.

"Well, khansaman, you will show me the way to the house."

But the khansaman appeared to have donned, with his clothes, a sense of his own importance. The authoritative tone of the lascar offended his dignity.

"Who are you, scum of the sea, that you tell a khansaman of Bengal what he shall do? Hold your tongue, piece of seaweed, or by the beard of the Prophet----"

The threat was never completed, for Desmond, stepping up close to the man, caught him by the back of the neck and shook him till his teeth rattled in his head.

"Quick! Lead the way! Foolish khansaman, do you want your fat body shaken to a jelly? That is the way with us khalasis from Gujarat. Quick, I say!"

"Hold, khalasi!" panted the khansaman; "I will do what you wish. Believe me, you are the first khalasi from Gujarat I have seen----"

"Or you would not have delayed so long. Quick, man!"

With a downcast air the man set off. The sun was getting high; being fat and soft, the khansaman was soon in distress. But Desmond allowed him no respite. In about two hours they arrived at the house he had mentioned. The gate was ajar; the door broken open. Hastily entering, Desmond knew instinctively by the appearance of the place that it was deserted.

He went through the house from bottom to top. Not a living person was to be seen. But in one of the rooms his quick eye caught sight of a small hair-pin such as only a European woman would use. He picked it up. In another room a cooking-pot had been left, and it was evident that it had but lately been used. The simple furniture was in some disorder.

The khansaman had with much labour managed to mount the stairs.

"Inshallah!" he said. "They are gone!"

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH

In which presence of mind is shown to be next best to absence of body.

The khansaman's surprise was clearly genuine, and Desmond refrained from visiting on him his disappointment. Bitter as that was, his alarm was still more keen. What had become of the ladies! With all his old impulsiveness he had come to rescue them, never pausing to think of what risks he might himself run. And now they were gone! Could Diggle have suspected that his carefully hidden tracks were being followed up, and have removed his prisoners to some spot remoter from the river? It was idle to speculate; they were gone; and there was no obvious clue to their whereabouts.

The khansaman, limp and damp after his unwonted exercise, had squatted on the floor and was fanning himself, groaning deeply. Desmond went to the window of the room and looked out over the country, wondering, longing, fearing. As he gazed disconsolately before him, he caught sight of a party of horsemen rapidly approaching. Bidding the khansaman stifle his groans, he watched them eagerly through the chiks of the window. Soon a dozen native horsemen cantered up to the front gate and drew rein. One of them, clad in turban of gold tissue, short blue jacket lavishly decorated with gold, and crimson trousers, bade the rest dismount. He was a tall man, a handsome figure in his fine array. He wore a sword with hilt inlaid with gold, the scabbard covered with crimson velvet; and in his girdle was stuck a knife with agate handle, and a small Moorish dagger ornamented with gold and silver.

He stood for a time gazing as in perplexity at the broken gateway. His face was concealed by his turban from Desmond, looking from above. But when he directed his glance upward, Desmond, peering through the chiks, could scarcely believe his eyes. The features were those of Marmaduke Diggle. His heart thumped against his ribs. Never, perhaps, in the whole course of his adventures, had he been in such deadly peril. The appearance of the party had been so sudden, and he had been so deeply engrossed with his musings, that he had not had time to think of his own situation.

"Come, son of a pig," said Diggle at length, throwing himself from his horse and beckoning to his syce, "we will search the place. There must be something to show who the dacoits were."

He strode into the compound, followed by his trembling servant.

"Indeed, huzur," said the man in shrill tones of excuse, "we did our best. But they were many: our livers were as water."

"Chup[#], pig! Wait till you are spoken to," exclaimed Diggle, turning angrily upon him.

[#] Shut up.

"Achchha, sahib! bahut achchha, sahib![#]----"

[#] Good, sahib--very good, sahib.

A vicious kick cut short his protestations, and the two passed out of hearing of the two watchers above, the khansaman having brought his quivering flabbiness to Desmond's side. Diggle passed into the entrance-hall, the native horsemen waiting like statues at the gate.

"It is the sahib!" whispered the shaking khansaman to Desmond: "Digli Sahib. He will kill me. He is a tiger."

"Silence, fool!" said Desmond sternly: "there must be a way out. Jaldi jao![#] we shall be too late."

[#] Go quickly.

The man seemed glued to the spot with fear. The footsteps of Diggle could be heard in the rooms below. In a few minutes he would reach the upper story; then it would indeed be too late to flee. If they could gain the back staircase they might slip down and hide in the garden. But fright appeared to have bereft the khansaman of all power of movement. Yet Desmond, for more than one reason, was unwilling to leave him. He knew what Diggle's tender mercies were; but he also knew that the khansaman, if discovered, would certainly try to purchase his safety by betraying his companion. So, without more ado, seizing him by the

neck, Desmond shook him vigorously.

"Come!" he said in a fierce whisper, "or I will leave you to face the sahib alone."

This summary treatment shocked the man from his stupor. Stepping on tiptoe he darted across the room, through the door communicating with a room beyond, into a narrow passage-way at the rear of the house. Here was a second staircase leading downwards to the servants' quarters.

"Wait there," said Desmond when they were half-way down. "If you hear any one coming up, rejoin me above."

He himself crept noiselessly back to the upper floor. No sooner had he reached the top than he heard Diggle moving in the room he had recently left. He darted to a khaskhas[#] curtain, through the meshes of which he could see into the two intercommunicating rooms. Diggle was carefully searching the apartment; he clearly knew it was the one lately occupied by the ladies.

[#] A fragrant grass whose roots are used for making screens.

As he stooped to pick up a cushion that lay on the floor beside a divan, his eye was caught by a scrap of crumpled paper. He snatched at it like a hawk and with quick fingers straightened it out--the fingers of the mittened hand that Desmond knew so well. On the paper was writing; the characters were English, but Diggle appeared to have some difficulty in making them out.

"'Your servant Surendra Nath Chuckerbutti,'" he said slowly aloud. "Who is Surendra Nath Chuckerbutti?" he asked his man, standing behind.

"Truly, huzur, I know not. It is a common name in Bengal--a vile Hindu; an unbeliever----"

"How did this paper come here?" cried Diggle impatiently.

"How should I know, sahib? I am a poor man, an ignorant man; I do not read----"

"Come with me and search the back of the house," said Diggle, turning away with an oath.

Desmond stepped noiselessly across the floor and joined the khansaman. They made their way out stealthily down the stairs, through the garden at the back, into a mango grove. There they remained hidden until Diggle, finding his search fruitless, remounted with his men and galloped away.

Desmond felt in a maze of bewilderment. It was clear that Diggle was ignorant of the whereabouts of the ladies; where had they been spirited to, and by whom? Apparently there had been an attack on the house, and they had been car-

ried away: was it by friends or foes? What was the meaning of the paper found by Diggle? Had the Babu had any hand in the latest disappearance, or was it his letter that had put some one else on their track? Desmond had heard nothing of Surendra Nath or his father since the sack of Calcutta.

There was no clue to the solution of the problem. Meanwhile it was necessary to get back to Calcutta. The journey had been delayed too long already, and Hossain's employer the grain merchant would have good reason for complaint if he felt that his business was being neglected.

"We must go, khansaman," said Desmond.

The man was nothing loth. They returned by the way they had come. Desmond left the man some distance short of Sinfray's house, promising, in return for his assistance, to use his best offices with the irate manjhi[#] on his behalf. Then he struck off for the point lower down the river where his boat was moored. As soon as he arrived they got under way, and late that evening reached Tanna Fort, where they had to deliver their cargo of rice for the use of the Nawab's garrison.

[#] Steersman.

In the dead of night they were surprised by a visit from Hubbo, the serang's brother. He had seen them, as they passed, from one of the sloops that lay in the river opposite to the fort. Though in chief command of the Nawab's boats at that point, he was still secretly loyal to the Company, and was anxious to serve their interests to the best of his power. He had now brought important news. The three sloops and two brigantines that lay off the fort were, he said, filled with earth. On the approach of Admiral Watson's fleet they were to be scuttled and sunk in the fairway. A subahdar[#] of Manik Chand's force was at present on board one of the sloops to superintend the work of scuttling. The signal would be given by the subahdar himself from his sloop.

[#] Equivalent to captain of infantry.

"Very well, Hubbo," said Desmond, "that signal must not be given."

"But how prevent it, sahib? I wish well to the Company; have I not eaten their salt? But what can one man do against many? The subahdar is a very fierce man; very zabburdasti.[#] When he gives the word it will be death to disobey."

[#] Masterful.

Desmond sat for some time with his chin on his hands, thinking. Then he asked:

"Do you know where the British fleet is at present?"

"Yes, sahib. I was in the bazar to-day; it was said that this morning the ships were still at Fulta. The sepoys are recovering from their privations during the voyage."

"We will drop down the river to-morrow as soon as we have unloaded our cargo. You may expect us back ahead of the fleet, so keep a good look-out for us. I will take care that Mr. Drake is informed of your fidelity, and you will certainly be well rewarded."

Early in the morning the cargo was unloaded; then, under pretence of taking in goods at Mayapur, the petala dropped down the river and gained Fulta under cover of night.

Next morning Desmond, having resumed his ordinary attire, sought an interview with Clive.

"The very man I wished to see," said Clive, shaking hands. "Your scouting is the one ray of light in the darkness that covers the enemy's arrangements. You have done remarkably well, and I take it you would not be here unless you had something to tell me."

Desmond gave briefly the information he had learnt from Hubbo.

"That's the game, is it?" said Clive. "A pretty scheme, egad! 'Twill be fatal to us if carried out. 'Twould put a spoke in the admiral's wheel and throw all the work on the land force. That's weak enough, what with Mr. Killpatrick's men dying off every day--he has only thirty left--and my own sepoys mostly skeletons. And we haven't proved ourselves against the Nawab's troops; I suppose they outnumber us thirty to one, and after their success at Calcutta they'll be very cock-a-hoop. Yet 'tis so easy to sink a few ships, especially if preparations have been made long in advance, as appears to be the case."

"I think sir, it might be prevented."

Clive, who had been pacing up and down in some perturbation of mind, his head bent, his hands clasped behind him, halted, looked up sharply, and said:

"Indeed! How?"

"If we could get hold of the subahdar."

"By bribing him? He might not be open to bribery. Most of these native officials are, but there are some honest men among them, and he may be one. He wouldn't have been selected for his job unless Manik Chand thought him trustworthy. Besides, how are we going to get into communication with him? And even if we did, and filled him to the brim with rupees, how are we to know he

wouldn't sell us in turn to the enemy?"

"But there are other ways, sir. We can depend on Hubbo, and if I might suggest, it would pay to promise him a rich reward if he managed to keep the passage clear."

"Yes, I agree. What reward would be most effective?"

"A few hundred rupees and the post of syr serang in the Company's service when Calcutta is retaken."

"Not too extravagant! Well, I will see Mr. Drake; the offer had better come from him and reach Hubbo through his brother."

"And then, sir, it ought not to be impossible to secure the subahdar himself when the moment arrives."

Clive looked at the bright eager countenance of the boy before him.

"Upon my word, my lad," he said, "I believe you can do it. How, I don't know; but you have shown so much resource already that you may be able to help us in this fix--for fix it is, and a bad one. 'Tis the will that counts; if one is only determined enough no difficulty is insuperable--a lesson that our friends from Calcutta might take to heart. But have you a plan?"

"Not at present, sir. I should like to think it over; and if I can hit on anything that seems feasible I should be glad of your leave to try."

"By all means, my lad. If you fail--well, no one will be more sorry than I, for your sake. If you succeed, you will find that I shall not forget. There's one thing I want to ask you before you go. Have you heard anything of my friend Merriman's ladies?"

"Yes, sir: and, as I suspected, Diggle is at the bottom of their disappearance."

He related the series of incidents up the river.

"Dressed like a native, was he? And looked like a risaldar?[#] There's no end to that fellow's villainy. But his day of reckoning will come I am sure of it, and the world will be none the worse for the loss of so vile a creature. If you take my advice, you'll say nothing to Mr. Merriman of this discovery. 'Twould only unsettle the poor man. He had better know nothing until we can either restore the ladies to him or tell him that there is no hope."

[#] Officer commanding a troop of horse.

"I don't give up hope, sir. They're alive, at any rate; and Diggle has lost them. I feel sure we shall find them."

"God grant it, my lad."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH

In which an officer of the Nawab disappears; and Bulger reappears.

"This will be my last trip, sahib, for my present master. He says I waste too much time on the river. He also complains that I go to places without leave and without reason. He heard we were at Mayapur, and wanted to know why. I made excuses, sahib; I said whatever came into my head; but he was not satisfied, and I leave his service in a week."

"That is a pity, Hossain. Unless we are in the service of some well-known banya we cannot go up and down the river without exciting suspicion. However, let us hope that before the week is out the fleet will be here."

Desmond looked a little anxious. The success of his project for preventing the fouling of the passage at Tanna Fort was more than eyer doubtful. The petala was moored opposite the Crane ghat at Calcutta, taking in a cargo of jawar[#] for Chandernagore. The work of loading had been protracted to the utmost by the serang; for Desmond did not wish to leave the neighbourhood of Calcutta at the present juncture, when everything turned upon their being on the spot at the critical moment.

[#] Millet.

While they were talking, a man who had every appearance of a respectable banya approached the plank over which the coolies were carrying the jawar on board. He stood idly watching the work, then moved away, and squatted on a low pile of bags which had been emptied of their contents. For a time the serang paid no apparent heed to him; but presently, while the coolies were still busy, he sauntered across the plank, and strolling to the onlooker, exchanged a salaam and squatted beside him. Passers-by might have caught a word or two about the grain-market; the high prices; the difficulties of transit; the deplorable slackness of trade; the

infamous duplicity of the Greek merchants. At last the banya rose, salaamed, and walked away.

As he did so the serang carelessly lifted the bag upon which the banya had been sitting, and, making sure that he was not observed, picked up a tiny ball of paper scarcely bigger than a pea. Waiting a few moments, he rose and sauntered back on board. A minute or two later the lascar in the after part of the boat was unobtrusively examining the scrap of paper. It contained three words and an initial:

To-morrow about ten.--C.

A change had been made in the composition of Hossain's crew since the incident at Sinfray's house. One day Desmond had found one of the Bengalis rummaging in the corner of the cabin where he was accustomed to keep his few personal belongings. Hossain had dismissed the man on the spot. The man saved from the river had been kept on the boat and proved a good worker, eager, and willing to be of use. He was an excellent boatman, a handy man generally, and, for a Bengali, possessed of exceptional physical strength. At Desmond's suggestion Hossain offered him the vacant place, and he at once accepted it.

Since his rescue he had shown much gratitude to Desmond. He was quick-witted, and had not been long on board before he felt that the khalasi was not quite what he appeared to be. His suspicion was strengthened by the deference, slight but unmistakable, paid by the serang to the lascar; for though Desmond had warned Hossain to be on his guard, the man had been unable to preserve thoroughly the attitude of a superior to an inferior.

On receiving the short message from Clive, Desmond had a consultation with Hossain. The coolies had finished their work and received their pay, and there was nothing unusual in the sight of the boatmen squatting on deck before loosing their craft from its moorings.

"If we are to do what we wish to do, Hossain," said Desmond, "we shall require a third man to help us. Shall we take Karim into our confidence?"

"That is as you please, sahib. He is a good man, and will, I think, be faithful."

"Well, send the other fellow on shore; I will speak to the man."

The serang gave the second of the two Bengalis who had formed his original crew an errand on shore. Desmond beckoned up the new man.

"Are you willing to undertake a service of risk, for a big reward, Karim?" he asked.

The man hesitated.

"It will be worth a hundred rupees to you."

Karim's eyes sparkled; a hundred rupees represented a fortune to a man of his class; but he still hesitated.

"Am I to be alone?" he asked at length.

"No," said Desmond; "we shall be with you."

"Ji! Han! If the sahib"--the word slipped out unawares--"is to be there it is fixed. He is my father and mother: did he not save me from the river? I would serve him without reward."

"That is very well. All the same the reward shall be yours--to be paid to you if we succeed, to your family if we fail. For if we fail it will be our last day: they will certainly shoot us. There is time to draw back."

"If the sahib is to be there I am not afraid."

"Good. You can go aft. We will tell you later what is to be done. And, remember, on this boat I am no sahib. I am a khalasi from Gujarat."

"I will remember--sahib."

Desmond told the serang that the help of the man was assured, and discussed with him the enterprise upon which he was bent. He had given his word to Clive that the blocking of the river should be prevented, and though the task bade fair to be difficult he was resolved not to fail. The vessels that were to be sunk in the fairway were moored opposite the fort at a distance of about a ship's length from one another. The subahdar was on the sloop farthest down the river, Hubbo on the next. With the subahdar there were three men. The signal for the scuttling of the vessels was to be the waving of a green flag by the subahdar; this was to be repeated by Hubbo, then by the serang on the sloop above him, and so on to the end. The vessels were in echelon, the one highest up the river lying well over to the left bank and nearest to the fort, the rest studding the fairway so that if they sank at their moorings it would be impossible for a ship of any size to thread its way between them. It did not appear that anything had been done to ensure their sinking broadside to the current, the reason being probably that, whatever might be attempted with this design, the river would have its will with the vessels as soon as they sank.

"Our only chance," said Desmond, "is to get hold of the subahdar. If we can only capture him the rest should be easy--especially as Hubbo is on the next sloop, which screens the subahdar's from the rest. It is out of speaking distance from the fort, too--another piece of luck for us. I will think things over in the night, Hossain; be sure to wake me, if I am not awake, at least a gharri[#] before dawn."

[#] A 60th part of a day: *i.e.* 24 minutes.

It was the first of January, 1757. At half-past seven in the morning a heavily-laden

petala was making its way slowly against the tide down the Hugli. Four men were on board; two were rowing, one was at the helm, the fourth stood looking intently before him. The boat had passed several vessels lying opposite Tanna Fort, at various distances from the bank, and came abreast of the last but one. There the rowers ceased pulling at an order from the man standing, who put his hand to his mouth and hailed the sloop. An answer came from a man on deck inviting the caller to come on board. With a few strokes of the oars the petala was run alongside, and Hossain joined his brother.

"Is it well, brother?" he said.

"It is well," replied Hubbo.

Desmond at the helm of the petala looked eagerly ahead at the last sloop of the line. He could see the subahdar on deck, a somewhat portly figure in resplendent costume. A small dinghy was passing between his vessel and the shore. It contained a number of servants, who had brought him his breakfast from the fort. The crews of the other vessels had prepared their food on board.

After a time a dinghy was let down from Hubbo's sloop. Hubbo himself stepped into it with one of his crew, and was rowed to the subahdar's vessel. Desmond, watching him narrowly, saw him salaam deeply as he went on board.

"Salaam, huzur!" said Hubbo. "Your excellency will pardon me, but bismillah! I have just discovered a matter of importance. Our task, huzur, has lain much on my mind; we have never done anything of the sort before, and seeing on yonder petala a man I know well, who has spent many years on the kala pani, I ventured to ask if he knew what time would be needed to sink a ship with several holes drilled in the hull."

"That depends on the size of the holes, fool!" said the subahdar with a snort.

"True, huzur; that is what the serang said. But he went on to tell me of a case like your excellency's. His ship was once captured by the pirates of the Sanderbands. They drilled several holes in the hull, and rowed away, leaving my friend and several of the crew to sink with the vessel. But the holes were not big enough. When the pirates had disappeared, the men on the ship, using all their strength, managed to run her ashore, filled up the holes at low tide, and floated her off when the tide came in again."

A look of concern crept over the subahdar's face as he listened. He was a man without experience of ships, and became uneasy at the suggestion that anything might mar the execution of his task. Manik Chand would not lightly overlook a failure.

"Hearing this, huzur," Hubbo continued, "I venture to mention the matter to your excellency, especially as it seemed to me, from what the serang said, that the holes drilled by the pirates were even larger than those made by the mistris[#] sent from the fort."

[#] Head workmen.

The subahdar looked still more concerned.

"Wai!" he exclaimed, "it is very disturbing. And there is no time to do anything; the Firangi's ships are reported to be on their way up the river; the dogs of Kafirs[#] may be here soon."

[#] Unbelievers.

He bit his fingers, frowned, looked anxiously down the river, then across to the brick fort at Tanna, then to the new mud fort at Aligarh on the other bank, as if wondering whether he should send or signal a message to one or the other. Hubbo was silent for a moment, then he said:

"Have I the huzur's leave to speak?"

"By the twelve imáms[#], yes! but quickly."

[#] High priests descending from Ali, the son-in-law of Mahomet.

"There is a mistri on board the serang's boat who is used to working in ships--a khalasi from Gujarat. He might do something on board your excellency's ship. If this vessel sank, according to the plan, the Firangi would not be able to get aboard the others, and they would have time to sink slowly."

"Barik allah![#] It is a good idea. Bid the mistri come aboard at once."

[#] "Bravo!"

Hubbo sent a long hail over the water. The serang cast off the rope by which he had made fast to the sloop, and the petala came slowly down until it was abreast of the subahdar's vessel. Hossain, Desmond, and Karim stepped aboard, the last carrying a small box of tools. Only the Bengali was left in the boat. All salaamed low to the subahdar.

"This, huzur, is my friend," said Hubbo, presenting his brother. "This is the mistri, and this his assistant."

"Good!" said the subahdar. "Go down into the hold, mistri: look to the holes; if they are not large enough, make them larger, and as quickly as you can."

Desmond with Karim dived down into the hold. It was filled with earth, except where a gangway shored up with balks of timber had been left to give access to the holes that had been drilled and temporarily stopped. After a few words from the subahdar, Hubbo and his brother followed Desmond below.

Half an hour later, Hubbo climbed up through the hatchway and approached the subahdar, who was pacing the deck, giving many an anxious glance down the river.

"The mistri has bored another hole, huzur. He said the more holes the better. Perhaps your excellency will deign to see whether you regard it as sufficient."

"Nay, I should defile my clothes," said the subahdar, not relishing the thought of descending into the malodorous depths.

"As your excellency pleases," said Hubbo salaaming.

Then the gravity of his charge appeared to overcome the subahdar's scruples. Gathering his robes close about him, he stepped to the hatchway and lowered himself into the hold.

"We must hasten," he said. "The ships of the Firangi may appear at any moment, and I must be on the look-out. Meantime," he added to Hubbo, "you keep watch."

For a man of his build he was fairly active. Dropping on to the loose earth, he scrambled over it towards the oil-lamp by whose light the mistri and his assistant were working.

"This, huzur," said Hossain, pointing to a circular cut in the planking of the vessel, "is the new hole. It is not yet driven through, but if your excellency thinks it sufficient----"

The subahdar craned forward to examine it. "Khubbar dar!"[#] said Desmond in a low voice.

[#] Look out!

Hossain had only waited for this signal. He threw himself on the stooping subahdar and bore him to the floor, at the same time stuffing a gag between his teeth. In a couple of minutes he was lying bound and helpless. His ornate garment was but little sullied. It had been stripped from him by the mistri, who hastily donned it over his own scanty raiment, together with the subahdar's turban.

"How will that do, Hossain?" asked Desmond with a smile.

The serang held up the oil-lamp to inspect him. With his other hand he

slightly altered the set of the turban and rearranged the folds of the robe.

"That is excellent, sahib," he said. "A little more girth would perhaps have been better, but in the distance no one will notice."

Then calling to Hubbo he said that all was ready. Hossain clambered through the hatchway, leaving Desmond concealed behind a large timber upright supporting the deck. As soon as the serang had reached his side Hubbo called to the men on watch and said--

"Eo! Ali, Chedi, come here!"

"Jo hukm!"[#] replied one of the men. Two of the three hurried aft, and at Hubbo's bidding swung down into the hold. The serang ordered them to go towards the lamp. They groped their way in that direction; Desmond sprang up through the hatchway; it was clapped down and firmly secured, and the subahdar with two-thirds of his crew was a prisoner in the hold. The third man at the far end of the boat had not seen or heard anything of what had happened.

[#] Whatever is ordered (I will obey)

So far the plot had succeeded admirably. Whatever order might reach the waiting vessels, it would not be given by the subahdar. The question now was, how to prevent the men in charge of the vessels and the authorities in Tanna Fort from becoming suspicious. The latter would not be difficult. Manik Chand would gain nothing by blocking the fairway unless it were absolutely necessary to do so, and, in common with other of the Nawab's lieutenants, he had an overweening confidence in the power of the forts to repel an attack from the English ships. For this reason it was advisable to make the minds of the other men easy, and Desmond soon hit on a plan.

"You had better return to your sloop, Hubbo," he said. "Send a message to the men on the other vessels that I--the subahdar, you know--have made up my mind to allow one of the enemy's ships to pass me before giving the signal. I shall thus capture one at least, and it may be the admiral's."

Hubbo set off, and when he reached his own vessel he sent a boat with a message to each of the ships in turn. Meanwhile, thinking the appearance of a petala alongside of the subahdar's sloop might awaken suspicion or at least curiosity in the fort, Desmond decided to send it down the river in charge of Hossain. He was thus left alone on deck with the subahdar's third man.

For a time the man, standing far forward, was unaware of the striking change in the personality garbed in the subahdar's clothes. But glancing back at length, he started, looked a second time, and after a moment's hesitation walked

down the deck.

"Go back to your post," said Desmond sternly, "and see that you keep a good look-out for the Firangi's ships."

The man salaamed and returned to the prow in manifest bewilderment. More than once he looked back as he heard strange knockings from below. Desmond only smiled. If the sound was heard from the forts, it would be regarded merely as a sign that the preparations for sinking the vessel were not yet completed.

Time passed on, and ever and anon Desmond looked eagerly down the river for a sign of the oncoming fleet. At last, somewhere about midday, he observed signs of excitement in Tanna Fort, and almost simultaneously saw a puff of smoke and heard a report from one of its guns. Shortly afterwards he observed the spars of a British-built ship slowly approaching up-stream. In full confidence that the scheme for blocking the river was now frustrated, he awaited with patience the arrival of the fleet, wondering whether the forts would make a determined resistance.

Slowly the vessel drew nearer. Another shot was fired from the fort, with what result Desmond could not tell. But immediately afterwards he heard the distant report of a heavy gun, followed by a crash near at hand, and a babel of yells. A shot from the British ship had plumped right in the centre of Tanna Fort. At the same moment Desmond recognized the figure-head.

"'Tis the *Tyger*!" he said to himself with a smile. "Won't Captain Latham grin when he sees me in this rig!"

Then he laughed aloud, for the valiant defenders of Tanna Fort had not waited for a second shot. They were swarming helter-skelter out of harm's way, rushing at the top of their speed up the river and leaving their fortress to its fate. On the other bank the garrison of Aligarh Fort had also taken flight, and were streaming along with excited cries in the direction of Calcutta. The man in the bows of the sloop looked amazedly at the new subahdar. Why did he laugh? Why did he not wave the green flag that lay at his hand? When were the men who had gone below going to knock out the stoppings of the holes and take to the boat with himself and their commander? But the subahdar still stood laughing.

All at once Desmond, remembering the real subahdar below, asked himself: what if he drove out the bungs and scuttled the vessel? But the question brought a smile to his lips. He could not conceive of the Bengali playing such a heroic part, and he possessed his soul in peace.

Now the *Tyger* was full in sight, and behind her Desmond saw the well-remembered *Kent*, Admiral Watson's flagship. The stampede from the forts had evidently been observed on board, for firing had ceased, and boats were already being lowered and filled with men. Desmond waited. The *Tyger's* boats, he saw,

were making for Tanna Fort: the *Kent's* for Aligarh. But one of the latter was heading straight for the sloop. Desmond could not resist the temptation to a joke. Making himself look as important as he could, he stood by the gunwale watching with an air of dignity the oncoming of the boat. It was in command of a young lieutenant. The men bent to their oars with a will, and Desmond could soon hear the voice of the officer as he called to his crew.

But his amusement was mingled with amazement and delight when, in the big form sitting in the bow of the boat, he recognized no other than his old messmate, his old comrade in the Battle of the Carts--William Bulger. The joke would be even better than he had expected. The boat drew closer: it was level with the nose of the sloop; and the lieutenant sang out the command, "Ship oars!" It came alongside.

"Bulger," cried the lieutenant, "skip aboard and announce us to that old peacock on deck."

"Ay, ay, sir," replied Bulger, "which his feathers will be plucked, or my name en't Bulger."

At the side of the sloop lay the dinghy intended to convey the subahdar and his men ashore when the work of sinking had been started. It was made fast to the vessel by a rope. Bulger sprang into the dinghy and then began an ascent so clever, and at the same time so comical, that Desmond had much ado not to spoil his joke by a premature explosion of laughter. The burly seaman swarmed up the rope like a monkey, clasping it with his legs as he took each upward grip. But the comedy of his actions was provided by his hook. Having only one arm--an arm, it is true, with the biceps of a giant--he could not clutch the rope in the ordinary way. But at each successive spring he dug his hook into the side of the vessel, and mounted with amazing rapidity, talking to himself all the time.

"Avast, there!" he shouted, as with a final heave upon the hook dug into the gunwale he hoisted himself on deck. "Haul down your colours, matey, which they make a pretty pictur', they do."

He came overpoweringly towards Desmond, his arm and stump spread wide as if to embrace him.

"I may be wrong," said Desmond, "but have I not the pleasure of addressing Mr. William Bulger?"

Bulger started as if shot. His broad face spelt first blank amazement, then incredulity, then surprised belief. Spreading his legs wide and bending his knees, he rested his hand on one and his hook on the other, shut one eye, and stuck his tongue out at the corner of his mouth.

"By the Dutchman!" he exclaimed, "if it don't beat cock-fighting! Sure, 'tis Mr. Burke himself! Anna Maria! But for why did you go for to make yourself sich a Guy Faux guy, sir?"

"How are you, old fellow?" said Desmond heartily. "I am a bit of a scarecrow, no doubt, but we've won the trick, man. The real guy is down below, dead from fright by this time, I expect. Sorry to give you the trouble of boarding, sir," he added, as the lieutenant came over the side. "If you'll take me into your boat, I'll be glad to report to the admiral or to Colonel Clive."

"By jiminy, Mr. Burke!" said the lieutenant, laughing, "you've got a way of your own of popping up at odd times and in odd places. Come with me by all means--just as you are, if you please. The admiral wouldn't miss the look of you for anything. By George! 'tis a rare bit of play-acting. Did I hear you say you've got some natives under hatchways?"

"Yes; the owner of this finery is below with two of his men. You can hear him now." There was a violent and sustained knocking below deck. "I'll send my man to release him. The fleet are all coming up, sir?"

"Yes; the *Bridgewater* and *Kingfisher* are close in our wake. Come along; we'll catch the admiral before he goes ashore."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH

In which Captain Barker has cause to rue the day when he met Mr. Diggle; and our hero continues to wipe off old scores.

Desmond received a warm welcome both from Admiral Watson and Colonel Clive. His account of the manner in which he had defeated Manik Chand's scheme for blocking the river was received with shouts of laughter, while his ingenuity and courage were warmly commended by both officers. Indeed, the admiral, always more impulsive than Clive, offered him on the spot a lieutenancy in the fleet, and was not very well pleased when Desmond politely declined the honour. Desmond caught a gleam of approval in Clive's eyes, and later in the day, when he saw his hero alone, he felt well rewarded.

"A naval lieutenant ranks higher than a lieutenant in the army--I suppose you know that, Burke?" said Clive.

"Yes, sir."

"And you're only a cadet. From to-day you are a lieutenant, my lad. I am pleased with you, and whatever his enemies say of Bob Clive, no one ever said of

him that he forgot a friend."

The forces proceeded to Calcutta next day, and retook the town with surprising ease. Manik Chand was so much alarmed by seeing the effect of the big guns of the fleet that he abandoned the place almost without striking a blow, and when the British troops entered they were too late even to make any prisoners save a few of the rag-tag and bobtail in the rear.

Mr. Merriman returned to Calcutta a few days later. Desmond was grieved to observe how rapidly he was aging. In spite of Clive's recommendation to keep silence he could not refrain from telling his friend what he had discovered about the missing ladies; and he did not regret it, for the knowledge that they were alive and, when last heard of, out of Peloti's clutches, acted like a tonic. Merriman was all eagerness to set off and search for them himself; but, Desmond pointing out the danger of such a course, he reluctantly agreed to wait a little longer, and see whether any news could be obtained during the operations which Clive was planning against the Nawab.

Meanwhile, Desmond learnt from Bulger what had happened to him since the fall of Calcutta. He was one of the hundred and forty-six thrown into the Black Hole.

"'Tis only by the mercy of the Almighty I'm here to-day," he said solemnly. "I saw what 'twould be as soon as the door of that Black Hole was locked, and me and some others tried to force it. 'Twern't no good. Mr. Holwell--he's a brave man, an' no mistake--begged an' prayed of us all to be quiet; but lor' bless you, he might ha' saved his breath. 'Twas a hot night; we soon began to sweat most horrible an' feel a ragin' thirst. We took off most of our clothes, an' waved our hats to set the air a-movin'; which 'twas hard enough work, 'cos we was packed so tight. I en't a-going' to tell you all the horrors o' that night, sir; I'd like uncommon to forget 'em, though I don't believe I never shall. 'Twas so awful that many a poor wretch begged of the Moors outside to fire on 'em. Worst was when the old jamadar put skins o' water in at the window. My God! them about me fought like demons, which if I hadn't flattened myself against the wall I should ha' been crushed or trodden to death, like most on 'em. For me, I couldn't get near the water; I sucked my shirt sleeves, an' 'tis my belief 'twas on'y that saved me from goin' mad. A man what was next me took out his knife an' slit a vein, 'cos he couldn't bear the agony no longer. Soon arter, I fell in a dead faint, an' knowed no more till I found myself on my back outside, with a Moor chuckin' water at me. They let me go, along with some others; and a rotten old hulk I was, there en't no mistake about that. Why, bless you, my skin come out all boils as thick as barnacles on a hull arter a twelve months' voyage, all 'cos o' being in sich bad air without water. And then the fever came aboard, an' somehow or other I got shipped to the mounseers' hospital at Chandernagore, which they was very kind

to me, sir; there en't no denyin' that. I may be wrong, but I could take my oath, haffidavy, an' solemn will an' testament that a mounseer's got a heart inside of his body arter all, which makes him all the better chap to have a slap at if you come to think of the why an' wherefore of it."

"But how came you on board the *Tyger*?"

"Well, when my boils was gone an' the fever slung overboard, I got down to Fulta an' held on the slack there; an' when the ships come up, they sent for me, 'cos havin' sailed up an' down the river many a time, they thought as how I could do a bit o' pilotin', there not bein' enough Dutch pilots to go round. An' I ha' had some fun, too, which I wonder I can laugh arter that Black Hole and all. By thunder! 'tis a merry sight to see the Moors run. The very look of a cutlass a'most turns 'em white, and they well-nigh drops down dead if they see a sailor man. Why, t'other day at Budge-Budge--they ought to call it Fudge-Fudge now, seems to me--the Jack-tars went ashore about nightfall to help the lobsters storm the fort in the dark. But Colonel Clive he was dog-tired an' went to his bed, sayin' as how he'd lead a boardin' party in the mornin'. That warn't exactly beans an' bacon; nary a man but would ha' took a big dose o' fever if they'd laid out on the fields all night. Anyways, somewhere about eleven, an' pitch dark, a Jack which his name is Strahan--a Scotchman, by what they say--went off all alone by himself to have a sort of private peep at that there fort. He was pretty well filled up wi' grog, or pr'aps he wouldn't ha' been quite so venturesome. Well, he waded up to his chin in a ditch o' mud what goes round the fort, with his pistols above his head. When he gets over, bang goes one pistol, an' he sets up a shout: 'One and all, my boys! one and all, hurray!' a-dreamin' I s'pose as he was captain of a boardin' party an' a crew o' swabs behind him. Up he goes, up the bastion; bang goes t'other pistol; then he outs with his cutlass, a-roarin' hurray with a voice like a twelve-pounder; down goes three o' them Moors; another breaks Jack's cutlass with his scimitar; bless you, what's he care? don't care a straw, which his name is Strahan; he've got a fist, he have, an' he dashes it in the Moor's face, collars his scimitar, cuts his throat and sings out 'Ho, mateys! this 'ere fort's mine!' Up comes three or four of his mates what heard his voice; they swings round the cannon on the bastion an' turns it on the enemy; bang! bang! and bless your heart, the Moors cut and run, an' the fort was ourn."

At the moment Desmond thought that Bulger was drawing the long bow. But meeting Captain Speke of the *Kent* a little later, he asked how much truth there was in the story.

"'Tis all true," said the captain, laughing, "but not the whole truth. The day after Strahan's mad performance the admiral sends for him: discipline must be maintained, you know. 'What's this I hear about you?' says Mr. Watson, with a face of thunder. Strahan bobbed, and scratched his head, and twirled his hat in his

hand, and says: 'Why to be sure, sir, 'twas I took the fort, and I hope there en't no harm in it!' By George! 'twas as much as the admiral could do to keep a straight face. He got the fellow to tell us about it: we had our faces in our handkerchiefs all the time. Then Mr. Watson gave him a pretty rough wigging, and wound up by saying that he'd consult me as to the number of lashes to be laid on. You should have seen the fellow's face! As he went out of the cabin I heard him mutter: 'Well, if I'm to be flogged for this 'ere action, be hanged if I ever take another fort alone by myself as long as I live!'"

"Surely he wasn't flogged?" said Desmond, laughing heartily.

"Oh no! Mr. Watson told us as a matter of form to put in a plea for the fellow, and then condescended to let him off. Pity he's such a loose fish!"

For two months Desmond remained with Clive. He was with him at the capture of Hugli, and in that brisk fight at Calcutta on February 5 which gave the Nawab his first taste of British quality. Siraj-uddaula was encamped to the north-east of the town with a huge army. In a heavy fog, about daybreak, Clive came up at the head of a mixed force of King's troops, sepoys and sailors, some 2,000 men in all. Hordes of Persian cavalry charged him through the mist, but they were beaten off, and Clive forced his way through the enemy's camp until he came near the Nawab's own tents, pitched in Omichand's garden. Siraj-uddaula himself was within an ace of being captured. His troops made but a poor stand against the British, and by midday the battle was over.

Scared by this defeat, the Nawab was ready to conclude with the Company the treaty which long negotiations had failed to effect. By this treaty the trading privileges granted to the Company by the Emperor of Delhi were confirmed; the Nawab agreed to pay full compensation for the losses sustained by the Company and its servants; and the right to fortify Calcutta was conceded. The long-standing grievances of the Company were thus, on paper, redressed.

A day or two after the battle a ship arrived with the news that war had been declared in Europe between England and France. Efforts to maintain neutrality between the English and French in Bengal having failed, Clive wished the Nawab to join him in an attack on the French settlements in Bengal. This the Nawab refused to do, though he wrote promising that he would hold as enemies all who were enemies of Clive--a promise that bore bitter fruit before many months had passed.

The French were keen rivals of the Company in the trade of India, and constantly took advantage of native troubles to score a point in the game. Clive had come to Bengal with the full intention of making the Company, whose servant he was, supreme; and having secured the treaty with Siraj-uddaula he resolved to turn his arms against the French. They were suspected of helping the Nawab in his expedition against Calcutta: it was known that the Nawab, treating his engage-

ments with reckless levity and faithlessness, was trying to persuade Bussy, the French commander in the Dekkan, to help him to expel the British from Bengal. There was excuse enough for an attack on Chandernagore.

But before Clive could open hostilities, he was required, by an old arrangement with the Mogul, to obtain permission from the Nawab. This permission was at length got from him by Omichand. The sack of Calcutta by the Nawab had caused Omichand great loss, and, hoping in part to retrieve it, he made his peace with Clive and the Council, and was then selected to accompany Mr. Watts when he went as British representative to Murshidabad. The wily Sikh, working always for his own ends, contrived to make the unstable young despot believe that the French were tricking him, and in a fit of passion he sealed a letter allowing Admiral Watson to make war upon them. He repented of it immediately, but the letter was gone. On the day after it reached the Admiral, March 12, 1757, Clive sent a summons to Monsieur Renault, the governor of Chandernagore, to surrender the fort. No reply was received that day, and Clive resolved, failing a satisfactory answer within twenty-four hours, to read King George's declaration of war and attack the French.

Desmond was breakfasting among a number of his fellow-officers next morning when up came Hossain, the serang who had accompanied him in his eventful journeys up and down the Hugli. Lately he had been employed, on Desmond's recommendation, in bringing supplies up the river for the troops. The man salaamed and said that he wished to say a few words privately to the sahib. Desmond rose, and went apart with him. At sunrise, said the man, a vessel flying Dutch colours had dropped down the river past the English fleet. Her name was Dutch, and her destination Rotterdam; but Hossain was certain that she was really the *Good Intent*, which Desmond had pointed out to him as they passed Chandernagore, and which they had more than once seen since in the course of their journeys. Her appearance had attracted some attention on the fleet; and the *Tyger* had sent a shot after her, ordering her to heave to; but having a strong north-east wind behind her, she took no notice of the signal and held on her course. Desmond thanked Hossain for the information, and, leaving his breakfast unfinished, went off at once to see Clive, whom he was to join that morning on a tour of inspection of the north-west part of the French settlement.

"Well, I don't see what we can do," said Clive, when Desmond repeated the news to him. "Mr. Watson no doubt suspected her when it was too late. Nothing but a regular chase could have captured her after she had passed. Ships can't be spared for that; they've much more important work on hand."

"Still, 'tis a pity, sir," said Desmond. "'Tis not only that Captain Barker is an interloper; he has been in league with pirates, and his being at Chandernagore all these months means no good."

"It means at any rate that he hasn't been able to get a cargo. Trade's at a standstill. Well, I'd give something to lay Mr. Barker and his crew by the heels--on behalf of the Company, Burke, for don't forget, as some of our friends of the Calcutta Council do, that I am here to save the Company, not their private property. 'Tis too late to stop the vessel now."

"I'd like to try, sir."

"I daresay you would. You're as ready to take risks as I am," he added, with his characteristic pursing of the lips; "and 'pon my word, you're just as lucky! For I'm lucky, Burke; there's no doubt of it. That affair at Calcutta might have done for us but for the morning mist. I'd like to try myself. It would punish a set of rogues, and discourage interloping, to the benefit of the Company. But I can't spare men for the job. Barker has no doubt a large crew; they'll be on the look-out for attack; no, I can't touch it."

Desmond hesitated for a moment. He did not wish to lose the fighting at Chandernagore, but he had the strongest personal reasons for desiring the arrest of the *Good Intent*.

"Do you think, sir, we shall capture this place to-morrow?" he asked suddenly.

"Scarcely, my boy," said Clive, "nor by to-morrow week unless the French have forgotten how to fight. Why do you ask?"

"Because if you'd give me leave I'd like to have a shot at the *Good Intent*--provided I got back in time to be with you in the fighting line, sir."

"Well, I can't keep things waiting, even for you," said Clive with a smile; "and it seems a wild-goose chase--rather a hazardous one."

"I'd risk that, sir. I could get together some men in Calcutta, and I'd hope to be back here in a couple of days."

"Well, well, Burke, you'd wheedle the Mogul himself. Any one could tell you're an Irishman. Get along then; do your best, and if you don't come back I'll try to take Chandernagore without you."

He smiled as he slapped Desmond on the shoulder. Well pleased with his ready consent, Desmond hurried away, got a horse, and, riding hard, reached Calcutta by eight o'clock and went straight to Mr. Merriman. Explaining what was afoot he asked for the loan of the men of the *Hormuzzeer*. Merriman at once agreed; Captain Barker was a friend of Peloti; and he needed no stronger inducement. Desmond hurried down to the river; the *Hormuzzeer* was lying off Cruttenden Ghat, and Mr. Toley for once broke through his settled sadness of demeanour when he learnt of the expedition proposed.

While Toley collected the crew and made his preparations, Desmond consulted a pilot. The *Good Intent* had passed Calcutta an hour before; but the man said that, though favoured by the wind, she would scarcely get past the bar at

Mayapur on the evening tide. She might do so if exceptionally lucky; in that case there would be very little chance of overtaking her.

Less than two hours after Desmond reached Calcutta two budgeros left Cruttenden Ghat. Each was provided with a double complement of men, and although the sails filled with a strong following wind, their oars were kept constantly in play. The passengers on board were for the most part unaccustomed to this luxurious mode of travelling. There were a dozen lascars; Hossain the serang; Karim, the man saved by Desmond at Chandernagore; Bulger and the second mate of the *Hormuzzeer*, and Mr. Toley, who, like Desmond and the serang, was clothed, much to Bulger's amusement, as a fairly well-to-do ryot.

For some hours the tide was contrary, but when it turned, the budgeros, under the combined impulse of sail, oar and current, made swift progress, arousing some curiosity among the crews of riverside craft, little accustomed to the sight of budgeros moving so rapidly. Approaching Mayapur, Desmond descried the spars of the *Good Intent* a long way ahead. Was there enough water to allow her to pass the bar? he wondered. Apparently there was, for she kept straight on her course under full sail. Desmond bit his lips with vexation, and had almost given up hope, though he did not permit any slackening of speed, when to his joy he saw the vessel strike her topsails, then the rest of her canvas. He at once ran his boats to the shore at Mayapur. There were a number of river craft at the place, so that the movements of his budgeros, if observed from the *Good Intent*, were not likely to awaken suspicion. On landing, he went to the house of a native merchant, Babu Aghor Nath Bose, to whom he had a letter from Mr. Merriman.

"Can you arrange for us," he said, when civilities had been exchanged, "to-night, the loan of two shabby old country boats?"

The native considered.

"I think I can, sahib," he said at length. "I would do much for Merriman Sahib. A man I frequently employ is now anchored off my ghat. No doubt, for fair pay, he and another might be persuaded to lend their craft."

"Very well, be good enough to arrange it. I only require the boats for a few hours to-morrow morning. Do you think twenty rupees would suffice?"

The native opened his eyes. He himself would not have offered so much. But he said--

"Doubtless that will suffice, sahib. The matter is settled."

"I will meet you in an hour. Thank you."

Returning to the budgeros, Desmond instructed Hossain to go into the bazar and buy up all the fresh fruit he could find. The sales for the day were over, but Hossain hunted up the fruit sellers and bargained so successfully that when he returned he was accompanied by a whole gang of coolies, bearing what seemed to Desmond an appalling quantity of melons, all for thirty rupees.

Before this, however, Aghor Nath Bose had reported that the hire of the two boats was duly arranged. They were open boats, little more than barges, with a small cabin or shelter aft. Their crews had been dismissed and had taken their belongings ashore; both were empty of cargo. Desmond went with Bulger on board and arranged a number of bamboos crosswise on the boats, covering up the empty spaces which would usually be occupied by merchandise. Over the bamboos he placed a layer of thin matting, and on this, when Hossain returned, he ordered the coolies to put the melons. To a casual observer it would have appeared that the boats were laden with a particularly heavy cargo of the golden fruit.

An hour before dawn the lascars and others from the *Hormuzzeer* slipped quietly from the budgeros on board the country boats, and bestowed themselves as best they could under the bamboo deck supporting the melons. It was cool in the early morning, although the hot season was approaching; but Desmond did not envy the men their close quarters. They were so much excited, however, at the adventure before them, and so eager to earn the liberal reward promised them if it succeeded, that not a man murmured. The Europeans had cooler quarters in the rude cabins, where they were hidden from prying eyes under miscellaneous native wraps.

Desmond had learnt from the pilot that it would be nearly eight o'clock before the depth of water over the bar was sufficient to allow a ship like the *Good Intent* to proceed with safety. A little before daybreak the two boats crept out from the ghat. It was well to avoid curiosity before Mayapur woke up. Desmond steered the first, Hossain the second; and besides the steersman there were two men visible on the deck of each. The tide was running up, but the wind still held from the north-east, and, though moderated in force since the evening, it was strong enough to take them slowly down towards the *Good Intent*. The sky was lightening, but a slight mist hung over the river. Desmond kept a close look-out ahead, and in a quarter of an hour he caught sight of the hull of the *Good Intent*, looming before him out of the mist. Allowing the second boat to come alongside, he turned and spoke to the serang.

"Now, Hossain, there she is. Hail her."

"Eo, eo!" shouted the man. "Do the sahibs want to buy any fresh fruit?"

An oath floated down from the stern. Captain Barker was there, peering intently through the mist up the river.

"Good melons, sahib, all fresh, and not too ripe. Cheap as ragi, sahib."

The mate had joined the captain; the Dutch pilot stood by smoking a pipe. The fruit boats had by this time come under the stern of the vessel, and Desmond heard the mate say--

"We came away in such a hurry, sir, that we hadn't time to take in a supply

of vegetables. Melons'll keep, sir, if they en't over-ripe."

Barker growled, then bent over and called to the serang. "How much?"

"Very cheap, sahib, very cheap. I will come aboard."

"Then be quick about it: we're going to trip the anchor, melons or no melons. D'ye hear?"

Hossain ran down the sail and clambered up the chains, while the other boatmen made fast to a rope thrown from the deck. Desmond also lowered his sail, steering so as to approach the port quarter of the *Good Intent*, the serang's boat being on the starboard. No rope was thrown to him, but he found that the tide was now only strong enough to neutralize the wind, and a stroke every now and again with the paddle at the stern kept his boat stationary.

Meanwhile there came from the deck the sing-song of men heaving up the anchor. When the serang stepped on board the greater part of the crew of the *Good Intent* were forward. Little time was spent in haggling. A melon was thrown up as a sample, and the price asked was so extraordinarily low that Captain Barker evidently thought he had got a bargain.

"Heave 'em up," he said, "and if they en't all up to sample----"

He broke off, no doubt believing that his fierce scowl was sufficient to point his threat. The serang hailed Desmond to come alongside. A few sweeps of the paddle brought the boat close underneath the *Good Intent's* side, and a second rope enabled him to make fast.

He swarmed up the rope, followed by one of the boatmen. The other on the boat began to fill a basket with melons, as if preparing to send them on board. At the same time Karim joined Hossain from the other side, so that there were now four of the party on deck. At a sign from Desmond, the two natives, carrying out instructions previously given, strolled towards the companion way. Hossain had started a conversation with the captain and mate, telling them about the British fleet he had passed as he came down the river. The Dutch pilot looked on, stolidly puffing his pipe.

Desmond stepped to the side of the vessel as though to hoist the basket with the running tackle. Making a sign to the men below, he called in a loud voice--

"Tano!"

Instantly the men swarmed up the rope. At the signal, misleading to the crew of the *Good Intent*, man after man crawled from beneath the matting on the boat below, and clambered up the ropes, led by Bulger on one side and Mr. Toley on the other. They made little noise, and that was drowned by the sing-song of the sailors and the grinding of the cables; the pilot with his back to the bulwarks saw nothing, and before Captain Barker knew that anything unusual was occurring both Bulger and Toley were tumbling over the sides. The captain stood almost petrified with amazement as he saw Bulger's red face rising like the morning sun.

He stepped back a pace.

"What the----"

The exclamation was never completed. Desmond stepped up to him, and in a low voice said--

"In the name of His Majesty King George I call upon you, Captain Barker, to surrender this ship."

He had a levelled pistol in his hand. Bulger with a cutlass sprang to one side, and Toley ranged himself on the other. Hossain had joined the two boatmen at the companion way; all had brought out pistols from the folds of their clothing, and the companion way commanded access to the ship's armoury.

Barker, who had grown purple at the sight of Bulger, now turned a sickly white. The mate dashed forward, calling to the crew, who, seeing that something was amiss, came along with a rush, arming themselves with belaying pins and any other weapons that came handy. Toley, however, leaving the cowed and speechless captain to Desmond, stepped towards the men. They recognized him at once and paused doubtfully.

"You know me," he said. "I'm a man of few words. You won't go further this voyage. Captain Barker has surrendered the ship. You'll drop those desperate things in your hands and go for'ard. Show a leg, now!"

The men looked from one to another, then at the captain, who was at that moment handing over his sword to Desmond. If Captain Barker was too badly beaten to swear, he was in poor case indeed. The crew's hesitation was but momentary: under Toley's sad gaze they sullenly flung down their weapons and went forward. Only then did the captain find speech. But it was to utter a fearful curse, ending with the name--

"Diggle."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-NINTH

In which our hero does not win the Battle of Plassey; but, where all do well, gains as much glory as the rest.

Leaving Mr. Toley to bring the *Good Intent* up to Calcutta, Desmond hurried back in advance and remained in the town just long enough to inform Mr. Merriman of

the happy result of his adventure and to change into his own clothes, and then returned to Chandernagore on horseback as he had come. He found Clive encamped two miles to the west of the fort. No reply having reached him from Monsieur Renault, Clive had read the Declaration of War as he had threatened, and opened hostilities by an attack on an outpost.

"You've no need to tell me you've succeeded, Burke," he said, when Desmond presented himself. "I see it in your eyes. But I've no time to hear your story now. It must wait until we have seen the result of the day's fighting. Not that I expect much of it in this quarter. We can't take the place with the land force only, and I won't throw away life till the Admiral has tried the effect of his guns."

The French in Chandernagore were not well prepared to stand a determined siege. The Governor, Monsieur Renault, had none of the military genius of a Dupleix or a Bussy. With him were only some eight hundred fighting men, of whom perhaps half were Europeans. Instead of concentrating his defence on the fort he scattered his men about the town, leaving the weakest part of his defences, the eastern curtain, insufficiently manned. He believed that Admiral Watson would find it impossible to bring his biggest ships within gunshot, and fancied that by sinking some vessels at the narrowest part of the river he would keep the whole British fleet unemployed--a mistake that was to cost him dear.

By the night of March 14 Clive had driven in the outposts. The immediate effect of this was the desertion of 2,000 natives sent to Renault's assistance by Nandkumar the faujdar of Hugli. A continuous bombardment was kept up until the 19th, when Admiral Watson arrived from Calcutta with the *Kent*, the *Tyger*, and the *Salisbury*.

Next morning an officer was despatched in a boat to summon Renault once more to surrender. Rowing between the sunken vessels, whose masts showed above water, he took soundings and found that with careful handling the men-o'-war might safely pass. Once more Renault refused to surrender. His offer to ransom the fort was declined by the Admiral, who the same night sent the master of the *Kent* to buoy the Channel. Two nights later, in pitch darkness, several English boats were rowed with muffled oars to the sunken vessels. Their crews fixed lanterns to the masts of these in such a way that the lights, while guiding the warships, would be invisible from the fort.

Early next morning Clive captured the battery commanding the river passage, and the three British ships ran up with the tide. The *Kent* and *Tyger* opened fire on the south-east and north-east bastions, and these two vessels bore the brunt of a tremendous cannonade from the fort. The French artillery was well served, doing fearful damage on board the British vessels. On the *Kent*, save the Admiral himself and one lieutenant, every officer was killed or wounded. One shot struck down Captain Speke and shattered the leg of his son, a brave boy of sixteen, who

refused to allow his wound to be examined until his father had been attended to, and then bore the pain of the rough amputation of those days without a murmur. Meanwhile Clive's men had climbed to the roofs of houses near the fort, which commanded the French batteries; and his musketeers poured in a galling fire and shot down the gunners at their work. As the walls of the barracks and fort were shattered by the guns from the ships, the sepoys crept closer and closer, awaiting the word to storm.

The morning drew on. Admiral Watson began to fear that when the tide fell his big guns would be at too low a level to do further execution. There was always considerable rivalry between himself and Clive, fed by the stupid jealousy of some of the Calcutta Council. While Clive, foreseeing even more serious work later, was anxious to spare his men, Watson was equally eager to reap all possible credit for a victory over the French. As it happened, neither had to go to the last extremity, for about half-past nine a white flag was seen flying from the fort. Lieutenant Brereton of the *Kent* and Captain Eyre Coote from the land force were sent to arrange the surrender, and a little later the articles of capitulation were signed by Admirals Watson and Pocock, and by Clive.

Desmond was by no means satisfied with the part he played in the fight. In command of a company of sepoys, he was one of the first to rush the shore battery and take post under the walls of the barracks in readiness to lead a storming party. But, as he complained afterwards to his friend Captain Latham of the *Tyger*, the fleet had the honours of the day.

"After all, you're better off than I am," grumbled the captain; "how would you like to have your laurels snatched away? Admiral Pocock ought to have remained on the *Cumberland* down the river and left the *Tyger* to me. But he didn't see the fun of being out of the fighting; and up he came post-haste and hoisted his flag on my ship, putting my nose badly out of joint, I can tell you. Still, one oughtn't to grumble. It doesn't matter much who gets the credit so long as we've done our job. 'Tis all in the day's work."

The victory at Chandernagore destroyed the French power in Bengal. But it turned out to be only the prelude to a greater event--an event which must be reckoned as the foundation stone of the British Empire in India. It sprang from the character of Siraj-uddaula. That prince was a cruel despot, but weak-willed, vacillating, and totally unable to keep a friend. One day he would strut in some vainglorious semblance of dignity; the next he would engage in drunken revels with the meanest and most dissolute of his subjects. He insulted his commander-in-chief, Mir Jafar: he offended the Seths, wealthy bankers of Murshidabad who had helped him to his throne: he played fast and loose with every one with whom he had dealings. His own people were weary of him, and at length a plot was hatched to dethrone him and set Mir Jafar in his place.

Mr. Watts, the British agent in Murshidabad, communicated this design to Clive and the Council of Calcutta, suggesting that they should co-operate in deposing the vicious Nawab. They agreed, on the grounds that his dishonesty and insolence showed that he had no real intention of abiding by the terms of his treaty, and that he was constantly intriguing with the French. A treaty was accordingly drawn up with Mir Jafar, in which the prospective Subah agreed to all the terms formerly granted by Siraj-uddaula. But Omichand, who was on bad terms with Mir Jafar and the Seths, threatened to reveal the whole plot to the Nawab and have Mr. Watts put to death, unless he were guaranteed in the treaty the payment of a sum of money equivalent to nearly £400,000. Clive was so much disgusted with Omichand's double-dealing that, though he was ready to make him fair compensation for his losses in Calcutta, he was not inclined to accede to his impudent demand. Yet it would be dangerous to refuse him point-blank. He therefore descended to a trick which, whatever may be urged in its defence--the proved treachery of Omichand, the customs of the country, the utter want of scruple shown by the natives in their dealings--must ever remain a blot on a great man's fame. Two treaties with Mir Jafar were drawn up; one on red paper, known as *lal kagaz*, containing a clause embodying Omichand's demand; the other on white, containing no such clause. Admiral Watson, with bluff honesty, refused to have anything to do with the sham treaty; it was dishonourable, he said, and to ask his signature was an affront. But his signature was necessary to satisfy Omichand. At Clive's request it was forged by Mr. Lushington, a young writer of the Company's. The red treaty was shown to Omichand; it bought his silence; he suspected nothing.

The plot was now ripe. Omichand left Murshidabad; Mr. Watts slipped away; and the Nawab, on being informed of his flight, wrote to Clive and Watson, upbraiding them with breaking their treaty with him, and set out to join his army.

Clive left Chandernagore on June 13, his guns, stores and European soldiers being towed up the river in 200 boats, the sepoys marching along the highway parallel with the right bank. Palti and Katwa were successively occupied by his advance guard under Eyre Coote. But a terrible rainstorm on the 18th delayed his march, and next day he received from Mir Jafar a letter that gave him no little uneasiness. Mir Jafar announced that he had pretended to patch up his quarrel with the Nawab and sworn to be loyal to him; but he added that the measures arranged with Clive were still to be carried out. This strange message suggested that Mir Jafar was playing off one against the other, or at best temporising until he was sure of the victor. It was serious enough to give pause to Clive. He was 150 miles from his base at Calcutta; before him was an unfordable river watched by a vast hostile force. If Mir Jafar should elect to remain faithful to his master the English Army would in all likelihood be annihilated. In these circumstances

Clive wrote to the Committee of Council in Calcutta that he would not cross the river until he was definitely assured that Mir Jafar would join him.

His decision seemed to be justified next day when he received a letter from Mr. Watts at Kalna. On the day he left Murshidabad, said Mr. Watts, Mir Jafar had denounced him as a spy and sworn to repel any attempt of the English to cross the river. On receipt of this news Clive adopted a course unusual with him. He called a Council of War, for the first and last time in his career. Desmond was in Major Killpatrick's tent when the summons to attend the Council reached that officer.

"Burke, my boy," he said, "'tis a mighty odd thing. Mr. Clive is not partial to Councils; has had enough of 'em at Madras first, and lately at Calcutta. D'you know, I don't understand Mr. Clive; I don't believe any one does. In the field he is as bold as a lion, fearless, quick to see what to do at the moment, never losing a chance. Yet more than once I've noticed, beforehand, a strange hesitation. He gets fits of the dumps, broods, wonders whether he is doing the right thing, and is as touchy as a bear with a sore head. Well, 'tis almost noon; I must be off; we'll see what the Council has to say."

Desmond watched the Major almost with envy as he went off to this momentous meeting. How he wished he was a little older, a little higher in rank, so that he too might have the right to attend! He lay back in the tent wondering what the result of the Council would be. "If they asked for my vote," he thought, "I'd say fight;" and then he laughed at himself for venturing to have an opinion.

By and by Major Killpatrick returned.

"Well, my boy," he said, "we've carried our point--twelve against seven!"

"For fighting?"

"No, my young firebrand; against fighting. You needn't look so chopfallen. There'll be a fight before long; but we're going to run no risks. We'll wait till the monsoon is over and we can collect enough men to smash the Subah."

"Was that Colonel Clive's decision?"

"'Twas indeed. But let me tell you. There was a comical thing to start with. Lieutenant Hayter, one of Watson's men, was bid to the Council, but the nincompoop was huffed because he wasn't allowed precedence of the Company's captains. These naval men's airs are vastly amusing. He took himself off. Then Mr. Clive put the case; fight at once, or wait. Against the custom, he voted himself first--against immediate action. Then he asked me and Grant in turn; we voted with him. 'Twas Eyre Coote's turn next; he voted t'other way, and gave his reasons--uncommonly well, I must admit. He said our men were in good spirits, and had been damped enough by the rains. The Frenchman Law might come up and join the Nawab, and then every froggy who entered our service after Chandernagore would desert and fight against us. We're so far from Calcutta

that 'twould be difficult to protect our communications. Those were his reasons. I watched Clive while Coote was speaking; he stuck his lips together and stared at him; and, have you noticed? he squints a trifle when he looks hard. Well, the voting went on, and ended as I said--twelve against immediate action, seven for."

"How did the Bengal men vote?"

"I'm bound to say, for--except Le Beaume. 'Twas the Madras men who outvoted 'em."

"Well, with all respect, sir, I think the opinion of the Bengal men, who know the people and the country, ought to have outweighed the opinion of strangers. Still, it would be difficult to oppose Colonel Clive."

Further conversation was cut short by the arrival of a messenger summoning Desmond to attend the colonel.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Under a clump of trees beyond the camp, sir. He's been there by himself an hour or more."

Desmond hurried off. On the way he met Major Coote.

"Hullo, Burke," cried the major; "you've heard the news?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry for it."

"All smoke, my dear boy, all smoke. Colonel Clive has been thinking it over, and has decided to disregard the decision of the Council and cross the river at sunrise to-morrow."

Desmond could not refrain from flinging up his hat and performing other antics expressive of delight; he was caught in the act by Clive himself, who was returning to his tent.

"You're a madcap, Burke," he said. "Come to my tent."

He employed Desmond during the next hour in writing orders to the officers of his force. This consisted of about 900 Europeans, 200 topasses, a few lascars, and some 2,000 sepoys. Eight six-pounders and two howitzers formed the whole of the artillery. Among the Europeans were about fifty sailors, some from the King's ships, some from merchantmen. Among the latter were Mr. Toley and Bulger, whose excellent service in capturing the *Good Intent* had enforced their request to be allowed to accompany the little army.

Shortly before dawn on June 22 Clive's men began to cross the river. The passage being made in safety, they rested during the hot hours, and resumed their march in the evening amid a heavy storm of rain, often having to wade waist-high the flooded fields. Soon after midnight the men, drenched to the skin, reached a mango-grove somewhat north of the village of Plassey: and there, as they lay down in discomfort to snatch a brief sleep before dawn, they heard the sound of tom-toms and trumpets from the Nawab's camp three miles away.

"'Tis a real comfort, that there noise," remarked Bulger, as he stirred the

camp-fire with his hook. Desmond had come to bid him good-night. "Ay, true comfort to a sea-goin' man like me. For why? 'Cos it makes me feel at home. Why, I don't sleep easy if there en't some sort o' hullabaloo--wind or wave, or, if ashore, cats a-caterwaulin'. No, Mr. Subah, Nawab, or whatsomdever you call yourself, you won't frighten Bill Bulger with your tum-tum-tumin'. I may be wrong, Mr. Burke, which I never am, but there'll be tum-tum-tum of another sort to-morrer."

The grove held by Clive's troops was known as the Laksha Bagh--the grove of a hundred thousand trees. It was nearly half a mile long and three hundred yards broad. A high embankment ran all round it, and beyond this a weedy ditch formed an additional protection against assault. A little north of the grove, on the bank of the river Cossimbazar, stood a stone hunting-box belonging to Siraj-uddaula. Still farther north, near the river, was a quadrangular tank, and beyond this a redoubt and a mound of earth. The river there makes a loop somewhat like a horseshoe in shape, and in the neck of land between the curves of the stream the Nawab had placed his intrenched camp.

His army numbered nearly 70,000 men, of whom 50,000 were infantry, armed with matchlocks, bows and arrows, pikes and swords. He had in all fifty-three guns, mounted on platforms drawn by elephants and oxen. The most efficient part of his artillery was commanded by Monsieur Sinfray, who had under him some fifty Frenchmen from Chandernagore. The Nawab's vanguard consisted of 15,000 men under his most trusty lieutenants, including Manik Chand and Mir Madan. Rai Durlabh, the captor of Cossimbazar, and two other officers commanded separate divisions.

Dawn had hardly broken on June 23, King George's birthday, when Mir Madan, with a body of picked troops, 7,000 foot, 5,000 horse, and Sinfray's artillery, moved out to the attack with great clamour of trumpets and drums. The remainder of the Nawab's army formed a wide arc about the north and east of the English position. Nearest to the grove was Mir Jafar's detachment. The English were arranged in four divisions, under Majors Killpatrick, Grant, and Coote, and Captain Gaupp. These had taken position in front of the embankment, the guns on the left, the Europeans in the centre, the sepoys on the right. Sinfray's gunners occupied an eminence near the tank, about two hundred yards in advance of the grove, and made such good play that Clive, directing operations from the Nawab's hunting-box, deemed it prudent to withdraw his men into the grove, where they were sheltered from the enemy's fire. The Nawab's troops hailed this movement with loud shouts, of exultation, and, throwing their guns forward, opened a still more vigorous cannonade, which, however, did little damage.

If Mir Madan had had the courage and dash to order a combined assault, there is very little doubt that he must have overwhelmed Clive's army by sheer weight of numbers. But he let the opportunity slip. Meanwhile Clive had sent

forward his two howitzers and two large guns to check Sinfray's fire.

Midday came, and save for the cannonading no fighting had taken place. Clive left the hunting-box, called his officers together, and gave orders that they were to hold their positions during the rest of the day and prepare to storm the Nawab's camp at midnight. He was still talking to them when a heavy shower descended, the rain falling in torrents for an hour. Wet through, Clive hastened to the hunting-lodge to change his clothes. Scarcely had he departed when the enemy's fire slackened. Their ammunition, having been left exposed, had been rendered almost entirely useless by the rain. Fancying that the English gunners had been equally careless, Mir Madan ordered his horse to charge; but the Englishmen had kept their powder dry, and received the cavalry with a deadly fire that sent them headlong back. At this moment Mir Madan himself was killed by a cannon-ball, and his followers, dismayed at his loss, began a precipitate retreat to their entrenchments.

Clive was still absent. The sight of the enemy retreating was too much for Major Killpatrick. Forgetting the order to maintain his position, he thought the moment opportune for a general advance. He turned to Desmond, who had remained at his side all the morning, and said:

"Burke, run off to Mr. Clive, and tell him the Moors are retreating, and I am following up."

Desmond hurried away, and reached the hunting-box just as Clive had completed his change of clothes. He delivered his message. Then for the first time he saw Clive's temper at full blaze. With a passionate imprecation he rushed from the lodge, and came upon the gallant major just as he was about to lead his men to the assault.

"What the deuce do you mean, sir, by disobeying my orders? Take your men back to the grove, and be quick about it."

His tone stung like a whip. But Killpatrick had the courage of his opinions, and Desmond admired the frank manner in which he replied.

"I beg a thousand pardons, Mr. Clive, for my breach of orders, but I thought 'twas what you yourself, sir, would have done had you been on the spot. If we can drive the Frenchmen from that eminence yonder, we command the field, sir, and----"

"You're right, sir," said Clive, his rage subsiding as easily as it had arisen. "You're too far forward to retire now. I'll lead your companies. Bring up the rest of the men from the grove."

Placing himself at the head of two companies of grenadiers he continued the advance. Sinfray did not wait the assault. He hastily evacuated his position, retiring on the redoubt near the Nawab's entrenchments. It was apparent to Clive that the main body of the enemy was by this time much demoralized,

and he was eager to make a vigorous attack upon them while in this state. But two circumstances gave him pause. To advance upon the entrenchments would bring him under a cross fire from the redoubt, and he had sufficient respect for the Frenchmen to hesitate to risk losses among his small body of men. Further, the movements of the enemy's detachments on his right caused him some uneasiness. He suspected that they were the troops of Mir Jafar and Rai Durlabh, but he had no certain information on that point, nor had he received a message from them. He knew that Mir Jafar was untrustworthy, therefore he was unwilling to risk a general assault until assured that the troops on his flank were not hostile to him. The doubt was suddenly resolved when he saw them check their movement, retire, and draw apart from the remainder of the Nawab's army. Giving the word at once to advance, he led his men to storm the redoubt and the mound on its right. For a short time Sinfray and his gallant Frenchmen showed a bold front; but the vigorous onslaught of the English struck fear into the hearts of his native allies; the news that the Nawab had decamped completed their panic, and then began a wild and disorderly flight: horsemen galloping from the field; infantry scampering this way and that; elephants trumpeting; camels screaming, as they charged through the rabble. With British cheers and native yells Clive's men poured into the Nawab's camp, some dashing on in pursuit of the enemy, others delaying to plunder the baggage and stores, of which immense quantities lay open to their hand. By half-past five on that memorable 23rd of June the battle was over--the battle that gave Britain immediately the wealthiest province of India and, indirectly, the mastery of the whole of that vast Empire. The loss to the British was only twenty-three killed and fifty wounded.

Clive rested for a while in Siraj-uddaula's tent, where he found on his inkstand a list of thirteen courtiers whom, even in that moment of dire extremity, the tyrant had condemned to death. From a prisoner it was learnt that the Nawab had escaped on a camel with two thousand horsemen, fleeing towards Murshidabad. All day he had been in a state of terror and agitation. Deprived of his bravest officer, Mir Madan; betrayed by his own relatives; the wretched youth had not waited for the critical moment. Himself carried to his capital the news of his defeat.

Orders were given to push on that night to Daudpur, six miles north of Plassey. But some little time was occupied by Clive's commissariat in replacing their exhausted bullocks with teams captured in the Nawab's camp. Meanwhile Clive sent Eyre Coote forward with a small detachment to keep the enemy on the run. Among those who accompanied him was Desmond, with Bulger and Mr. Toley. Desmond hoped that he would overtake and capture Monsieur Sinfray, from whom he thought it likely he might wrest information about Mrs. Merriman and her daughter. Diggle had made use of Sinfray's house; it was not improbable that the Frenchman knew something about the ladies. As for the seamen, they

were so much disgusted at the tameness of the enemy's resistance that they were eager for anything that promised activity and adventure. Their eagerness was no whit diminished when Desmond mentioned what he had in his mind.

"By thunder, sir," said Bulger, "give me the chanst, and I'll larn the mounseer the why and wherefore of it. And as for Diggle--well, I maybe wrong, but I'll lay my share o' the prize money out o' the *Good Intent* that he's hatchin' mischief, and not far off neither. Show a leg, mateys."

CHAPTER THE THIRTIETH

In which Coja Solomon reappears; and gives our hero valuable information.

Before Major Coote reached Daudpur he was overtaken by a horseman bearing a message from Clive.

"A job for you, Burke," said the major, after reading the note. "Mr. Clive is annoyed at the Nawab's escape, and thinks he may give us trouble yet if he can join hands with Law and his Frenchmen. I am to send you ahead to reconnoitre. You've been to Murshidabad, I think?"

"No, only to Cossimbazar; but that is not far off."

"Well, you know best part of the road, at any rate. The colonel wants you to go with a small party to Murshidabad and find out whether the Frenchmen have come within reach. You'll have to go on foot; take care you don't get into trouble. Pick your own men, of course. You must have a rest first."

"Two or three hours will be enough for me. If we start soon, we shall reach Murshidabad before dawn, and with little risk. I'm to come back and report, sir?"

"Of course. No doubt you will meet us on the way."

On reaching Daudpur Desmond selected twenty sepoys who knew the country, and ordered them to be ready to start with him at midnight. Bulger and Mr. Toley he had already informed of his mission, and he found them more than eager to share in it. Just after midnight the little party set out. A march of some four hours brought them to the outskirts of Murshidabad. Desmond called a halt, encamped for the remainder of the night in a grove of palmyras, and at dawn sent forward one of the sepoys, disguised as a ryot, to make inquiries as to what was happening in the town.

It was near midday when the man returned. He reported that the Nawab had gone to his palace, while the chiefs who had accompanied or followed him from the field of battle had shown their recognition that his cause was lost by deserting him and going to their own houses. He had heard nothing of the French. The Nawab, in order to ingratiate himself with the people, had thrown open his Treasury, from which all and sundry were carrying off what they pleased. The city was in such a disturbed state that it would be exceedingly unsafe for any stranger to enter.

Desmond decided to remain where he was until nightfall, and then to skirt the city and move northwards, in the hope of learning something definite of the movements of the French. Meanwhile he sent the man back to learn if anything happened during the day.

In the evening the man returned again. This time he reported that Mir Jafar had arrived with a large force and taken possession of the Nawab's palace of Mansurganj. Immediately after the traitor's arrival Siraj-uddaula had collected all the gold and jewels on which he could lay hands and fled with his women. Suspecting that the luckless Nawab was making for Rajmahal in the hope of meeting Law there, Desmond made up his mind to follow. He struck his camp, marched all night, and soon after daybreak reached a village near the river some miles south of Rajmahal.

He was surprised to find the village deserted. But passing a small house, he heard cries of distress, and going in he found the place full of smoke from some straw that had been kindled, and a man tied by his thumbs to a staple in the wall. He recognized the man in a moment. It was Coja Solomon, Mr. Merriman's rascally agent of Cossimbazar. He was half dead with pain and fright. Desmond cut him loose and hurried him out of the stifling room into the open, where Bulger revived him with copious douches of water until he was sufficiently recovered to explain his unhappy plight.

"God be praised!" exclaimed the Armenian fervently. "You were in time, sir. I was seeking safety. The Faujdar of Murshidabad villainously ill-used me. He owes me much, but there is no gratitude in him. I saw that neither my life nor my goods were safe, so I packed up what valuables I could and left with my servants, intending to go to Patna, where I have a house. I had just reached this village when I saw a band of some fifty horsemen approaching from the other end, and fearing that I might be set upon and plundered, I hastily concealed my goods at the edge of the tank hard by. Alas! it availed me nothing. My servants were dispersed, and the risaldar of the horsemen, a European, seized me and thrust me into this house, abandoned like all the rest, for the people fled before his approach, fearing he would burn and destroy. Then I was tied up as you saw, until I confessed where my valuables were hidden: one of my servants must have betrayed me. The

risaldar promised to release me as soon as I should confess; but instead of that he set fire to the straw out of pure villainy, for what could I do to him? I have been a good friend to the English. Sir, pursue that man: he must be a Frenchman. I will give you a quarter, nay, a third of my goods, if you recover them."

"That is impossible, Khwaja. I've only twenty men on foot: what is the use of pursuing fifty on horseback? Your friendship for the British has come, I fear, a little too late."

The Armenian wrung his hands in despair, whining that he was a ruined man. Then his tone changed; was there not still a chance? He explained that, some hours before his capture, he had met a man who recognized him as the agent of Mr. Merriman. The man said that he was a servant of Surendra Nath Chuckerbutti, and was on his way to meet Clive Sahib, carrying a letter to him from his master. But he was worn out, having come many miles through the heat without rest. Coja Solomon unblushingly confessed that, while the man slept at midday, he had taken the letter from him and read it.

"Why did you do that?"

"I thought it would be safer with me, for every one knows----"

"Yes, that'll do, Khwaja; go on with your story."

"The letter was written at Manda, a village on the other side of the river, and the writer, Surendra Nath, informed Mr. Clive that the wife and daughter of Mr. Merriman were in his house there, and asked him to send a party to bring them away. Naturally, sir, I was pleased to find----"

"Go on with your story," cried Desmond impatiently, all excitement at coming upon the track of the ladies at last.

"It was while I was reading the letter that the horsemen came up. The risaldar took it from me, read it, and questioned me. His face changed; he smiled evilly, and from the questions he asked me, and from what I heard him say to his followers, he has gone to Manda, with a design to take these ladies."

"Stay, Khwaja; what was he like?"

"He was a tall man, with scars on his face, and on his right hand he wore a black glove."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Desmond. His look of trouble and anxiety did not escape the Armenian.

"It is but a little since he left me," he said. "If you make your way to the village--it is three coss on the other side of the river--you may capture him, sir, as well as regain my property, a third of which is yours."

"But how--how, man?" cried Desmond impatiently. "How can we overtake him on foot?"

"He will have to ride near to Rajmahal to find a ford, sir. He will cross there, and ride back down the river some five coss before he comes to Manda."

"But could he not swim the river?"

"He could, sir, but it is a feat he is not likely to attempt, seeing that there is no need for haste. I implore you, sir, start at once. Otherwise I am a ruined man; my old age will be spent in poverty and distress."

"If he cannot cross, how can I?" said Desmond.

"There is sure to be a boat on the bank, sir, unless they have all been seized by the Nawab, who, rumour says, is coming from Bhagwangola by river to Rajmahal."

Desmond felt uneasy and perplexed. He doubted whether his duty to Clive did not forbid him to go in search of the ladies, and there was no possibility of communicating in time with either Clive or Coote. Then it suddenly occurred to him that pursuit of Diggle might well come within his duty. Diggle was in the service of the Nawab; it was possible that he was even leading an advance guard of Law's Frenchmen.

"Were there any other Europeans besides the risaldar among the horsemen?" he asked.

"Two, sahib, and they were French. I suspect they were from the force of Law Sahib; he was, I know, at Patna a few days ago."

Desmond hesitated no longer. His affection for Mr. Merriman prompted an attempt to save the ladies: his mission from Clive was to discover the movements of the French. If he set off on Diggle's track he might succeed in both. It was a risky adventure--to pursue fifty men under such a leader as Diggle, with only a score. But twice before he had tried conclusions with Diggle and come off best: why should fortune fail him the third time?

Hurriedly explaining the situation to Mr. Toley and Bulger, he hastened with his men down to the river. There was no boat at the village ghat. He looked anxiously up and down. On the opposite side he saw a long river-boat moored in a narrow backwater. He could only get it by swimming, and here the current ran so swiftly that to swim would be dangerous. Yet, on the spur of the moment, he was preparing to take to the water himself when one of his men, a slim and active sepoy, volunteered to go.

"Good! I will give you ten rupees if you bring the boat across. You are a good swimmer?"

"The sahib will see," replied the man, with a salaam and a smile.

He took a kedgeree pot, an earthen vessel used for cooking, and firmly tied to it a stout bamboo some six feet long, so that the thicker end of the pole was even with the mouth of the vessel. The boat was slightly down the stream. The man ran a little way up stream to a point where a spit of land jutted out into the river, his companions following quickly with the pot. This they placed mouth downwards in the water. Then the sepoy mounted on top, launched himself on this novel buoy, and, holding on to the pole, floated breast high in the water down

with the current, dexterously steering himself with his legs to the point where the boat was moored. He clambered into it, and with rapid movements of the stern oar brought it to the other side, receiving with beaming face the promised reward.

While this was going on the sky had been darkening. A north-wester was coming up, and after his experience on the eve of Plassey, Desmond knew what that meant. He hastily embarked his men, and the boat started; but it had scarcely covered a third of the distance across the river when the wind struck it. Fortunately the sail was not up: as it was, the flat-bottomed boat was nearly swamped. Drenching rain began to fall. The river was lashed to fury: for three crowded minutes it seemed to Desmond a miracle that the boat was still afloat. The waves dashed over its sides; the men, blinded by the rain, were too much cowed to attempt to bale out. Desmond was at the helm; Bulger and Toley had an oar each; although only a few yards distant, Desmond could scarcely see them through the pelting rain. Then the wind moderated somewhat: he peremptorily ordered the men to use their brass lotis[#] to bale out the boat, and determined to turn the storm to account.

[#] Drinking vessels.

With great difficulty he got the sail hoisted, and their the vessel ran down the river at racing speed. The distance to Manda, as the Armenian had told him, was six miles--four by river, two by land. By Diggle's route it was ten miles. The horsemen had had such a start of him that he feared he could not overtake them in time. Still the storm that now helped him would hinder them. If he survived the perils of the river passage, he might even yet succeed. He was alive to the risks he ran. More than once, as the wind changed a point, it seemed that the cranky craft must turn turtle. But she escaped again and again, plunging on her headlong course. The sepoys were sturdy enough fellows, but being unused to the water they cowered in the bottom of the boat, except when Desmond's stern command set them frantically baling. Almost before it seemed possible they came in sight of a bend in the river, which one of the men, who knew the district, had described to Desmond as the nearest point to the village he sought. So rapid had the passage been that Desmond felt that, if they could only land in safety, they might have gained considerably on Diggle's horsemen. The latter must have felt the full effect of the gale: it was likely that for a time they had taken shelter. Desmond and his men were wet to the skin, but, profiting by the recollection of what had happened at Plassey, they had kept their ammunition dry.

At the bend the river presented a shelving beach, being at least twice as

wide at this point during the rainy season as at other periods. Without hesitation Desmond ran the nose of the boat straight at the beach: she came to with a violent bump; the men tumbled out waist-deep into the water, and with shrill cries of relief scrambled ashore.

No time was lost. Waiting only to inspect their muskets, Desmond at once began the march, the band being led by the man who knew the country. Another man, a noted runner, formerly a kasid in the employment of the Nawab of the Dekkan, was sent in advance to find Surendra Nath's house, give him warning of Desmond's coming, and instruct him to have some one on the look-out for the approach of the enemy, if Diggle was not indeed already in possession of the village. The rest pushed on with all speed. The storm had cleared the air: the rain had ceased; and though it was unpleasant walking over the soppy ground, the march was much cooler than it had been earlier in the day.

Desmond longed for a hill from which to get a view of the country; but, as almost everywhere in the valley of the Ganges, it was dead flat. The party was within a quarter-mile of the village when the kasid came running back. He had found the Babu's house. From its flat roof a body of horse had been seen in the distance, nearly a coss away. Desmond at once ordered his men to double, and as they dashed into the village among the wondering people the kasid pointed out Surendra Nath's house at the far end--a small two-storied building, surrounded by a wall and approached through a rickety iron gateway. It was the first house to which the approaching horsemen would come.

A man in native dress was standing at the gate. At first Desmond did not recognize him, but as he drew nearer he saw that it was Surendra Nath himself, looking years older--weak, thin, sunken-eyed, little like the sleek well-fed Babu Desmond had last seen in Calcutta.

"Are the ladies safe?" asked Desmond, yards ahead of his men.

"Yes, sir, quite safe," replied Surendra Nath, trembling.

"Thank God for that! Go in, Babu; tell them we are here to protect them."

While speaking he had eagerly scanned the surroundings. On each side of the sodden track that did duty for a road there was a mango grove. Desmond directed Toley to take four men to one side, and Bulger four men to the other, and place themselves among the trees. When the first three files of the horsemen should have passed through, the seamen were to give the word to fire; then, taking advantage of the inevitable confusion, to rush with their men to the house. Desmond himself meanwhile, with the remaining twelve, set to work to strengthen the defences. These proceedings were watched with amazement by the villagers, who, men, women, and children, stood in groups, discussing in shrill tones the movements of these energetic strangers.

There was a small veranda to the house. This was wrenched away by main

force. The posts and other parts of the woodwork were carried to the gateway and piled up as rapidly as possible to form a rough barricade. Scarcely was this task half accomplished when the clanking of weapons was heard in the distance, soon accompanied by the swashing of horses' hoofs on the drenched soil. Desmond coolly ordered his men to proceed with the work. A minute later there was a sharp discharge of musketry, followed by cries, shouts, and the sound of galloping horses. The villagers scuttled away shrieking. Immediately afterwards Bulger and Toley with their eight men sprang from cover and made a dash for the wall.

"Muskets first!" shouted Desmond.

The muskets were pitched over: then the men scrambled up, Desmond and his sepoys assisting them to get across. Almost the first to drop down into the compound was Bulger, whose hook had proved, not for the first time, of more service than a sound left arm. Once over himself, he used his hook to haul the sepoys after him, with many a vigorous "Yo heave ho!"

"All aboard, sir," he cried, when the last of the men was within the wall. "I may be wrong, but I lay my button-hook 'tis now all hands to repel boarders; and only two cutlasses among us--mine and Mr. Toley's. Howsomdever, notwithstandin', and which is all the same!"

Desmond ordered four of his men to post themselves at the barricaded gateway: the rest he divided into two parties, and stationed behind the wall at each side. The wall was six feet high--too high to fire over--but as it was in a somewhat dilapidated condition there was no difficulty in knocking away several loose bricks at intervals, so as to make a rough-and-ready battlement. Desmond instructed the men to fire alternately through the embrasures thus made. As soon as one had fired he was to fall back and reload as fast as possible while another man took his place. By this device, Desmond hoped to deceive the enemy for a time as to the numbers of the defenders in the compound.

But it was not to be expected that the enemy could long be kept out, and in the last resort it would be necessary to retreat to the house. In view of the presence of the ladies this was a step to be avoided if possible. It might indeed be the wiser course to surrender for their sakes. As the thought struck Desmond he called to the Babu, who was keeping watch on the roof.

"Babu," he said, "ask the ladies to occupy the least-exposed room. Tell them that if the enemy get over the wall I will try to make an arrangement with them, rather than provoke an attack on the house."

The Babu disappeared. But a few moments later Phyllis Merriman, wearing the costume of a native lady came running out.

"Mother bids me say, Mr. Burke," she said, "on no account let such considerations weigh with you. She says fight to the last. We will risk anything rather than go back to captivity. You will beat them, Mr. Burke, won't you?"

"I will do my best, Miss Merriman," replied Desmond. "But pray go back; they may be here at any moment. I need not say how glad I am to find you well. Pray tell Mrs. Merriman that we will all do our best for her and you."

"I know you will. And my father?"

"He is distressed, of course, but clings to hope. Do, Miss Merriman, retire at once. I see the enemy coming from the grove."

"Phyllis! Phyllis!" cried Mrs. Merriman from the house; "come in at once! Mr. Burke, send her in. Have no mercy on the wretches, I implore you."

The girl walked back reluctantly. Unknown to Desmond, she went no further than the doorway, where, just hidden from sight, she watched all that followed.

The enemy had clearly been nonplussed by their sudden check. There were no British troops, so far as they knew, for many miles round, and concerted resistance from the natives was unlikely. But they were now emerging from the mango grove, a hundred yards away. They came on foot, leaving their horses out of musket range. Desmond's heart sank as he counted them. There were even more than he had supposed. They numbered fifty-four, and several had no doubt been left in charge of the horses. Still he felt that he had two advantages. The first was his position behind a wall; the second, the fact that the enemy, unless they had obtained information from the villagers, could not know what force they had to deal with. Their ignorance of course must be only temporary; if one of them should succeed in mounting the wall the weakness of the defence must immediately be seen.

As the enemy, tall men in the costume of native cavalry, assembled by twos and threes at the edge of the grove Desmond noticed three Europeans leave the main body and advance some way into the open. It was with a flush of indignation and a fierce resolve to bring him at last to book that Desmond recognized one of them as Diggle. With his companions he walked at a safe distance completely round the building. For some time they halted at the back, carefully scanning the position. Here the wall approached the house much more closely than in the front, and no one could mount it without being fully exposed to fire from the upper windows. After his examination, Diggle returned with the two men, whom from their appearance Desmond judged to be Frenchmen, to the main body, and sent off half a dozen men towards the other end of the village. While they were gone one of the Frenchmen seemed to Desmond to be expostulating with Diggle; but the latter only laughed and waved his gloved hand in the direction of the house.

The messengers soon returned, dragging with them three of the villagers. These Diggle took aside separately and questioned: it was clear to Desmond that he was ascertaining the strength of the garrison. Apparently satisfied, he divided his force into three parts; the largest, consisting of some forty men, remained at

the edge of the grove; the two smaller proceeded to the right and left of the back of the house. One was in command of a Frenchman, but the Frenchman who had expostulated with Diggle had apparently refused to have anything to do with the affair: he held himself aloof, and by and by disappeared into the grove. Diggle's evident intention was to weaken the garrison by forcing Desmond to divide his already too small force. He had to detach eight of his men--three to the windows and five to the wall; leaving only fourteen, including Bulger and Toley, to meet the rush in front.

It was not long in coming. Diggle did not wait to parley. Taking a musket from one of his men he raised it to his shoulder and fired at a sepoy whose head just showed above the gate. The man raised his hand to his brow and fell back with a sharp cry--a bullet had ploughed a furrow through his scalp. Desmond checked his men as they were about to fire in reply; but when, in the rush that followed, the enemy came within thirty yards, he gave the word, and seven muskets flashed forth across the barricade. The attacking party were coming forward in close order, and five of the men fell. But the rest sprang forward with shrill yells, Diggle, who was untouched, urging them on. Even the fire of Desmond's second rank failed to check them. Two or three dropped; others were soon swarming up the wall, and though the defenders with clubbed muskets struck savagely at their heads and hands as they appeared above the coping, if one drew back, another took his place; and the wall was so long that at several points there were gaps between Desmond's sepoys where the enemy could mount unmolested.

Desmond, having discharged his two pistols, disposing of one of the assailants with each shot, was in the act of reloading when Diggle leapt into the compound, followed by two of his men. Shouting to Bulger, Desmond threw the pistols and rammer on the ground behind him, and, drawing his sword, dashed at the three intruders, who were slightly winded by the charge and their exertions in scaling the wall.

Desmond could never afterwards remember the details of the crowded moments that followed. There were cries all around him: behind, the strident voice of Mr. Toley was cheering his men to repel the assault at the back of the house; at his side Bulger was bellowing like a bull of Bashan. But all this was confused noise to him, for his attention was wholly occupied with his old enemy. His first lunge at Diggle was neatly parried, and the two, oblivious of all that was happening around them, looked and into each other's eyes, read grim determination there, and fought with a cold fury that meant death to the first that gave an opening to his opponent's sword.

If motive counted, if the right cause could always win, the issue admitted of no doubt. Desmond had a heavy score to pay off. From the time when he had met Diggle in the street at Market Drayton to his last encounter with him at the

Battle of the Carts, he had been the mark of his enmity, malice, spite, trickery. But Desmond thought less of his own wrongs than of the sorrow of his friend Mr. Merriman, and the harrowing wretchedness which must have been the lot of the ladies while they were in Diggle's power. The man had brought misery into so many lives that it would be a good deed if, in the fortune of war, Desmond's sword could rid the world of him.

And Diggle, on his side, was nerved by the power of hate. Baseless as were his suspicions of Desmond's friendship with Sir Willoughby Stokes, he felt that this boy was an obstacle. Ever since their paths had crossed he had been conscious that he had to do with a finer, nobler nature than his own; and Desmond's courage and skill had again and again frustrated him. As he faced him now, it was with the feeling that, if this boy were killed, a most dangerous barrier to the realisation of his nefarious schemes would be removed. Thus, on either side, it was war to the death. What Desmond lacked in skill and experience he made up for by youth and strength. The two combatants were thus equally matched: a grain in the scale might decide the issue. But the longer the fight lasted the better were Desmond's chances. He had youth in his favour. Thanks in large measure to Diggle himself, Desmond had led a hard life: his muscles were like iron. The older man by and by began to flag: more than once his guard was nearly beaten down: nothing but his great skill in swordsmanship and the coolness that never deserted him saved him from the sharp edge of Desmond's blade.

But when he seemed almost at the end of his strength, fortune suddenly befriended him. Bulger, with his clubbed musket and terrible iron hook, had disposed of the two men who leapt with Diggle into the compound; but there were others behind them: three men dropped to the ground close by, and, making a simultaneous rush, bore Bulger back against Desmond, hampering his sword arm. One of Desmond's sepoys sprang to the rescue, but he was too late to stem the tide. A blow from a musket stock disabled Bulger's right arm; he lost his footing. As he fell, his hook, still active, caught Diggle's leg and brought him to the ground, just as, taking advantage of the diversion, he was making exultantly what he intended for a final lunge at Desmond. He fell headlong, rolling over Bulger, who was already on the ground.

How the end came Desmond did not clearly see. He knew that he was beset by three of Diggle's men, and, falling back before them, he heard the voice of Phyllis Merriman close by, and felt a pistol thrust into his hand. She had slipped out of the doorway, picked up the weapons as they lay where Desmond had flung them, completed the loading, and advanced fearlessly into the thick of the fray. At one and the same moment Desmond fired upon his enemies and implored the brave girl to go back. Then suddenly there was a lull in the uproar. Bulger was upon his feet, Diggle's men paused in their fighting and gazed in consternation

at their prostrate leader. It seemed but a moment; then every man of them was scrambling pell-mell over the wall, yelling as the stocks of the sepoys' muskets sped them on their flight.

"What is it?" asked Desmond.

Bulger pointed to the form of Diggle, lying huddled among the fallen.

"He've gone to his account, sir, which I may be wrong, but the Almighty have got a long black score agen him."

"How did it happen?"

Bulger lifted his hook.

"'Twas that there Diggle as was the why and wherefore o' this little ornament, sir, and 'twas only right he should be paid for what he done. We fell down, him and me; I was under. He hoisted himself on his hands to get free, and I lifted my hook, sir, and caught him a blow under the chin. If it didn't break his neck, sir, my name en't Bill Bulger, which I'm sorry for his poor wicked soul all the same."

Phyllis had her hands clasped about Desmond's arm.

"Is he dead?" she asked in a voice of awe.

"Come away," said Desmond quietly, leading her towards the house. "Let us find your mother."

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FIRST

In which friends meet, and part; and our hero hints a proposal.

The fight was over. It was Diggle's quarrel; neither the Frenchmen nor the natives had any concern in it, and when their leader was dead they had no more interest in continuing the struggle. They drew off; the weary defenders collected the dead and attended to the wounded; and Desmond went into the house.

"God bless you, Mr. Burke!" said Mrs. Merriman, tears streaming from her eyes as she met him and clasped his hands. "You are not hurt?"

"Just a scratch or two, ma'am; nothing to trouble about."

But the ladies insisted on bathing the two slight wounds on head and arm which in the heat of the fight he had not noticed. And then Mrs. Merriman told him all that had happened since the day he left them in such merry spirits at Khulna. How they had been trapped by Diggle, pretending to be a Monsieur de

Bonnefon: how he had conveyed them to the house of his friend Sinfray: how after many months their whereabouts had been revealed to Surendra Nath by one of his numerous relatives, a man who had a distant cousin among Sinfray's servants: how the Babu, displaying unwonted energy, had come with a number of friends and fallen unawares upon their captors, afterwards taking them to a house of his father's in this village: how the old man and his son had both been stricken with jungle fever and the father died, and when the Babu lay helpless and unconscious on his sick bed they had found no means of communicating with their friends. Mrs. Merriman shuddered as she spoke of the terrors of their captivity. They had been well treated, indeed; Monsieur de Bonnefon, or Diggle, as she afterwards learned to call him, had visited them several times and seen that their wants were supplied. But their enforced seclusion and inactivity, their dread of the unknown, their uncertainty as to what might have befallen Mr. Merriman, had told heavily upon their health and spirits. Rumour brought news of the tragedy of the Black Hole: they heard that the few survivors were prisoners of the Nawab, and they feared the worst. From Surendra Nath they learnt that they need not despair; and since then they had lived on in the hope that when the Babu had recovered from his illness, he would find some means of restoring them to the husband and father from whom they had so long been parted.

"Surendra Nath has a heart of gold, Mr. Burke," said Mrs. Merriman in concluding her story. "Poor man! he has been very ill. We must do something to show our gratitude for his devotion when we get back to Calcutta."

Desmond then in his turn told them all that had happened since their disappearance. When they learnt of the result of the battle of Plassey and that Clive was marching towards Murshidabad, they were eager to set off at once.

"Yes, ma'am," said Desmond, "we will start as soon as we can. I will leave you to make your preparations. It may not be possible to start before night, the country being so disturbed, so that if you can sleep through the day you will be fitter for the journey."

He left them, and going into the compound found Bulger and Toley looking with curiosity at the body of Diggle.

"Hi, sir!" said Bulger as Desmond came up to them; "this here bit o' velvet is explained at last. Mr. Toley he slit it with his cutlass, sir, and never did I see a man so down in the mouth when he knowed what was under it. Ten't nothing at all, sir; just three letters; and what for he went and burnt them three letters into the back of his hand 'twould beat a Daniel to explain. 'Fur,' sir, that's what they spells; but whether 'tis rabbit-skin or fox I can't say, though 'tis most likely fox, knowin' the man."

Desmond stooped and looked at the unclad right hand. The letters FUR were branded livid below the knuckles.

"He was always quoting Latin, Bulger," he said. "Fur is a Latin word: it means 'thief'."

"Which I might have knowed it, sir, only I think as how the man what did the stampin' might have done it in plain English. I don't hold with these foreign lingos, sir; there allers seems something sly and deceivin' about 'em. No right man 'ud ever think 'fur' meant 'thief'! Thief an' all, sir, he's dead. Mr. Toley and me 'll put him away decent like: and it won't do him no harm if we just says 'Our Father' over the grave."

Desmond was turning away when three of his men came into the compound, two grasping a Frenchman by the arms, the third a black boy. The former Desmond recognized as the man whom he had seen expostulating with Diggle; the latter was Scipio Africanus, looking scared and miserable. The men explained that, pursuing the fugitives, they had captured their prisoners in the grove. The Frenchman at once addressed Desmond in broken English. He said that he had tried in vain to dissuade Diggle from his attempt to capture the ladies. The party had been sent by Monsieur Law to announce his coming. He was advancing from Patna with a considerable body of French troops designed for the support of the Nawab. As he was speaking the Frenchman caught sight of Diggle's exposed hand. He started, with an exclamation of surprise. Then in answer to Desmond's question he revealed the secret that had so long perplexed him.

Seven years before, he said, in December, 1750, there was a brilliant foreigner named Peloti among the officers of Major de la Touche, a young soldier who had been singled out by Dupleix, the French Governor of Pondicherry, as a military genius of the first order. Peloti was with the French army when, less than 4,000 in number, it fell upon the vast hordes of Nadir Jang near Gingi, and won the battle that set Muzaffar Jang on the throne of the Dekkan and marked the zenith of Dupleix's success. The new Nawab, in gratitude to the French for the services rendered him, sent to Dupleix a present of a million rupees, and a casket of jewels worth half as much again. This casket was given to Peloti to deliver: he had abused his trust by abstracting the gem of the collection, a beautiful diamond; and the theft being accidently discovered, Dupleix in his rage ordered the thief to be branded on the right hand with the word 'fur,' and drummed him out of the French employment. For some years nothing more had been seen of Peloti; but he had recently returned, and offered his services to Bussy, the French commander in the Dekkan. He brought with him valuable information, gained in London, of the East India Company's intentions; and this, together with his evident knowledge of Clive's movements and of affairs in Calcutta, had caused his former offence to be overlooked, and his offer was accepted.

Desmond thanked the Frenchman for his information. "I am sorry to keep you a prisoner, monsieur," he said; "but I must trouble you to return with me to

Murshidabad. I can promise you good treatment from Colonel Clive."

The Frenchman smiled, shrugged, and exclaimed: "Eh bien! À la guerre comme à la guerre!"

Remembering Coja Solomon, Desmond asked Toley to search Diggle's body before burying it. But nothing was found, except a little money. The Armenian's property had evidently been left under guard in the grove, and was doubtless by this time far away, in the possession of one or other of Diggle's runagate followers.

Desmond was collecting his party, preparatory to starting for Murshidabad, when a native horseman rode into the village at full speed, dismounted, and, humbly salaaming, announced that he had a message from Law Sahib. It was clear that, seeing Europeans, he supposed them to be Frenchmen. Desmond did not undeceive him. The man said that Law Sahib had received news of Clive Sahib's victory at Plassey, and, seeing that his promised assistance to the Nawab was too late, had at once retired to Patna and wished Diggle Sahib to rejoin him there. Dismissing the messenger, Desmond rejoiced that there was no reason now to delay his departure; his mission for Clive was fulfilled.

At nightfall the party set off. Closed chairs had been provided for the ladies, and these were carried in the midst, Bulger on one side, Toley on the other, and Desmond behind. One person whom Desmond had expected to take with him was absent: Scipio Africanus, on seeing the dead body of his master, had uttered one heart-rending howl and fled. No attempt was made to pursue him; and Desmond never saw him again. He reflected that, villainous as Diggle had proved to be, he had at least been able to win the affection of his servant.

On the way they met Coja Solomon, who, on learning of the disappearance of his valuables, heaped abuse upon Desmond and went away wringing his hands.

Travelling slowly, by easy stages, and only in the cooler hours, it took the party three days to reach Murshidabad. Desmond found that Clive had entered the city two days before and taken up his abode at the Murad Bagh. Mir Jafar had been accepted as Nawab, and nothing had been heard of Siraj-uddaula. Desmond first sought out Major Coote.

"By George, Burke!" said that officer, "Colonel Clive is in a towering rage at your long absence; he expected your return long ago. And you ought to know that Colonel Clive in a rage is not quite as mild as milk."

"I'm afraid I must brave his anger," said Desmond. "I've found Mr. Merriman's ladies."

"You have?"

"Yes, and brought them back with me. And Peloti will trouble us no more: we had to fight for the ladies, and Bulger killed him. Won't Mr. Clive forgive me?"

"I can't answer for Mr. Clive; no one can say what he will do. But I tell you one thing: you'll put Warren Hastings' nose out of joint. You knew he was sweet

on Merriman's daughter?"

"No, I didn't know it. I don't see what that has to do with me."

"Don't you, egad!" said Coote with a laugh. "Sure, my boy, you'll see it before long. Well, I won't keep you to hear your story. Go to Mr. Clive at once, and let me know what happens."

Desmond found Clive in company with Mr. Watts and Rai Durlabh, Mr. Scrafton and Omichand. He had some difficulty in obtaining admittance; only his representation that he bore important news prevailed with the darwan. He learnt afterwards that the great bankers, the Seths, had just left the meeting, after it had been proved that, owing to the depletion of the treasury, only one half of the immense sums promised to Clive and the English in Mir Jafar's treaty could be paid at once, the remainder to follow in three years. Desmond entered the room just in time to hear Clive say to Scrafton:

"It is now time to undeceive Omichand."

Mr. Scrafton went up to the Sikh, and said quietly in Hindustani:

"Omichand, the red paper is a trick; you are to have nothing."

Omichand stood for a moment dazed: then he fell back in a faint and was carried by his attendants from the room. The shock had unhinged the poor man's reason: he lingered insane for eighteen months and died.

At the time Desmond knew nothing of the deceit that had been practised on him; but in the light of his after knowledge he understood the strange expression that clouded Clive's face as the old man was carried away: a look of pity mingled with contempt. Catching sight of Desmond, the great soldier flashed out:

"What do you mean, sir, by absenting yourself so long? I sent you in advance because I thought you would be speedy. A snail would have gone more quickly."

"I am sorry, sir," said Desmond. "I was unexpectedly delayed. I had got nearly as far as Rajmahal when I learnt the whereabouts of Mrs. Merriman. She was in hiding with Surendra Nath, one of Mr. Merriman's men. I heard that Diggle--Peloti, sir--was about to attempt her recapture, and I felt that you yourself, had you been in my place, would have tried to save the ladies."

Clive grunted. "Go on, sir," he said.

"We found the place, just in time, sir. Diggle came up with a couple of Frenchmen and a troop of native horse. We beat them off, and I have brought the ladies here."

"And forgotten your instructions?"

"No, sir. Monsieur Law was advancing from Patna: Peloti was coming ahead to inform the Nawab of his approach. But the whole country knows of your victory; the news reached Monsieur Law, and he at once turned back. The messenger he sent to inform Peloti of his change of plan came too late."

"Indeed! What was Peloti about?"

"He was killed in the fight, sir."

"A good riddance!" exclaimed Clive impetuously. Then a far-away look came into his eyes; his expression softened. "Poor wretch!" he said in an undertone. "How many did his men muster, Burke?"

"Nearly sixty, sir."

"And yours?"

"A score of sepoys, sir; but I had two seamen with me: Bulger, whom you know; and Mr. Toley, an American, mate of one of Mr. Merriman's ships. They were worth a dozen others."

Clive grunted again.

"Well, go and tell Mrs. Merriman I'll be glad to wait on her. And look here, Burke: you may consider yourself a captain in the Company's service from this day. Come now, I'm very busy: go and give Mrs. Merriman my message, and take care that next time you are sent on special service you are not drawn off on any such mad expedition. Come to me to-morrow."

Desmond trod on air as he left the house. Clive's impulsiveness had never before seemed to him such an admirable quality.

As he went into the street he became aware from the excited state of the crowd that something had happened. Meeting a sepoy he inquired, and learnt that Siraj-uddaula had just been brought into the city. The luckless Nawab had arrived in his boat close to Rajmahal, and, with the recklessness that characterized him, he had gone ashore while his servants prepared a meal. Though disguised in mean clothes he had been recognized by a fakir who happened to be at the very spot where he landed. The man had a grudge against him; his ears and nose had been cut off some time before by the Nawab's orders. Hastening into Rajmahal he had informed the governor, who sent a guard at once to seize the unhappy prince and bring him to Murshidabad.

Before the next morning dawned Siraj-uddaula was dead. Mir Jafar handed him to his son Miran with strict orders to guard him carefully. Acting on a mocking suggestion of Miran, a courtier named Muhammad Beg took a band of armed men to the Nawab's room, and hacked him to death. Next morning his mutilated body was borne on an elephant's back through the streets, and it was known to his former subjects that the prince who had ruled them so evilly was no more. Such was the piteous end, in his twenty-sixth year, of Siraj-uddaula.

Immediately on arriving in Murshidabad, Desmond had sent a kasid to Calcutta to inform Mr. Merriman that his wife and daughter had been found and were safe. The merchant set off at once on horseback and arrived in the midst of preparations for the return of the army to Calcutta. Desmond was present at his meeting with the ladies; the scene brought a lump into his throat, and his embarrassment was complete when one and all overwhelmed him with praise and

thanks.

Nor was Surendra Nath forgotten. His readiness and courage at the critical moment had undoubtedly saved the ladies; Mr. Merriman declared that he would henceforth have a higher opinion of the Bengali character. The Babu beamed with joy when his employer announced that he would give him the *Hormuzzeer* and a considerable part of his business.

"I change the name to *Merriman*, sir," he said, "and my family will hold that name in veneration and esteem unto third and fourth generations."

A few days later a long procession of three hundred boats, laden with the money, plate and jewels that had been handed over to the British, set off with colours flying, amid strains of martial music, down the river to Calcutta. Every man who had taken part in the expedition had a share of the vast treasure. Desmond found himself richer by £3,000.

Calcutta was *en fête* when the expedition returned. Desmond was surprised to see how much had already been done to repair the ruin wrought by the Nawab. A new city was rising from the ruins. Congratulations were poured on the victors; and though now, as always, Clive had to contend with the jealousies of lesser men, there was none but had to admit that he was a great man who deserved well of his country.

Mr. Merriman at once completed the winding up of his affairs, begun months before. His recent troubles had much aged him; India was to him now a hateful country, and he decided to return to England immediately with his wife and daughter. He tried to persuade Desmond to accompany him, but in vain.

"'Tis very good of you, sir," said Desmond warmly; "you have done so much for me. But Mr. Clive has made me a captain: his work is not yet done, and I do not feel that I can leave him until I have done something to justify his confidence in me."

"Well, boys will be boys. I have made a fortune here: I suppose you want to do the same. 'Tis natural. But don't stay in India as long as I have. I don't want to lose sight of you. You have done me the best service man ever did: you have avenged my brother and restored to me all that I held dearest in the world. I love you as a son, Desmond; I wish you were my son indeed, my boy."

Desmond looked a little uncomfortable.

"May I venture----" he began hesitatingly; "do you think, in some years time, if I get on here, I might----"

"Well?"

"Do you think I might--in short, that I might have a chance of becoming your son, sir?"

"Eh? Is that it? Mr. Warren Hastings asked me the same question the other day, Desmond. You can't both have her, you know. What does Phyllis say?"

"I--I haven't asked her, sir."

"Quite right. You're only a boy. Well, Hastings is to remain as assistant to Mr. Scrafton, our new agent at Murshidabad. You remain as assistant--or is it rival, eh?--to Mr. Clive. You're both out of the way. Phyllis may prefer Bulger."

"Bulger!"

"Yes. Didn't you know? Phyllis has taken a fancy to him; that hook of his appears to be a most fascinating feature; and he will accompany us home."

Desmond laughed a little awkwardly.

"I hope----" he began.

"He won't hook her? But there, I mustn't make sport of such a serious matter. Go on as you have begun, my dear lad, and I promise you, when you come home, that if Phyllis hasn't found some one already to her liking, you shall have all the influence I can exert with the minx."

"Thank you, sir: I couldn't ask for more. There's another thing: do you think you could do anything for Mr. Toley? He's a capital fellow."

"I know it. I have anticipated you. Toley is appointed captain of the *Jane*, an Indiaman that arrived the other day; her captain died of scurvy on the way out. She'll sail for England next week; we go with her, and so does that villain Barker, who'll get his deserts when he reaches London. The *Good Intent* is broken up; her interloping is over for good and all. But come, my boy, sure 'tis time we dressed: Admiral Watson likes punctuality, and I promise you he'll give us a capital dinner. A word in your ear: Phyllis is to sit between you and Hastings. You can't eat him, at any rate."

A week later Desmond went down to the Company's ghat to see the *Jane* sail. Mr. Toley, in his brand new uniform, looked more melancholy than ever, and Phyllis Merriman made a little grimace when she saw for the first time the captain under whose charge she was to sail for home.

"Don't be alarmed," said Desmond, laughing. "The sadder he looks, I believe the happier he is. Silas Toley is a fine seaman and a true gentleman.--I wonder if we shall ever meet again, Miss Merriman?"

"I wonder, Mr. Burke."

"I shall hear about you, I hope."

"Dear me! 'tis very unlikely. Father hates putting pen to paper. 'Tis far more likely I shall hear of you, Mr. Burke, doing terrible things among these poor Indians--and tigers: I am sure you must want to shoot a tiger."

"You shall have my first skin--if I may send it."

"Mamma will be charmed, I am sure; though, indeed, she may have too many of them, for we have the same promise from--let me see--Mr. Lushington, Mr. Picard, Mr. Hastings, and----"

"All aboard!" sang out a voice from the deck of the vessel.

Phyllis gave Desmond her hand, and looked at last into his eyes. What he read in hers filled him with contentment. She ran across the plank and joined her father and mother, to whom Desmond had already said his adieus. At the last moment Bulger came up puffing, a miscellaneous collection of curiosities dangling from his hook.

"Good-bye, sir," he said, giving Desmond a hearty grip. Then he shut one eye and jerked his head in the direction of the vessel. "Never you fear, sir: I'll keep my weather eye open. Missy have took an uncommon fancy to this here little fish-hook o' mine, and 'tis my belief I'll keep her hangin' on to it, sir, nevertheless and notwithstandin' and all that, till you comes home covered with gore and glory. I may be wrong."

He tumbled on deck. Then amid cheers, with flags flying and handkerchiefs waving, the good ship moved from the ghat into the swelling river.

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SECOND

In which the curtain falls, to the sound of bells; and our hero comes to his own.

It was a mellow day in October, 1760, a little more than six years since the day when Market Drayton gave rein to its enthusiasm in honour of Clive. From a flagstaff newly erected on the roof of the *Four Alls* on the Newport Road a square of bunting flapped in the breeze. Inside the inn the innkeeper was drawing a pint of ale for his one solitary customer, a shambling countryman with a shock of very red hair, and eyes of innocent blue.

"There, that makes a quart, Tummas Biles, and 'tis as much as your turnip head can safely carry."

He passed the can across the bar on a hook that projected from a wooden socket in his sleeve.

"Why now, Mr. Bulger," said Tummas the tranter, "what fur do you go fur to miscall me like other fowk? I've been miscalled ever since that day since I drove a stranger into Market Drayton six year ago. I mind me he had a red feather in his cap, and not knowing my name was plain Tummas he called me Jehu, he did, and I never forgot it. Ay, and I tell ya what, Mr. Bulger: it took me two year to find out why he give me such an uncommon name. I mind I was sittin' by a hayrick of

Mr. Burke's--that was long afore he was lamed by that terrible horse o' his--and ponderin' on that heathen name, when all at wunst it comed to me like a flash o' lightnin'. 'Jehu!' says I to myself. 'I bin and got ya at last.' Ya see, when that stranger saw me, I were drivin' a horse. Well, I says to my horse, 'Gee-ho!' says I. Not knowin' my true chrisom name, the stranger takes up my words an' fits 'em to me. 'Gee-ho!' says I; 'Gee-ho!' says he; only bein' a kind o' furriner he turns it into 'Jehu': an' the name fits me uncommon. Hee! hee!"

"I may be wrong," said Bulger, "but 'tis my belief 'Hee-haw!' would fit you a big sight better. But hark! en't them the bells a-ringin '?"

The two hastened to the door, and stood looking down the road towards Market Drayton. From the distance came the faint sounds of a merry peal. By and by a four-horsed open carriage with outriders appeared on the crest of the hill. Amid the dust it raised another could be seen, and behind this a long line of vehicles. Every coachman's whip was decorated with a wedding favour. The cavalcade approached rapidly. As the first carriage drew nearer Bulger became more and more excited, and when it dashed past the inn he raised his hook and shouted "Hurray! hurray!" with the full force of his lungs.

"Give 'em a cheer, Tummas," he cried. "Hee-haw will do if you knows no better. Hurray for Major Desmond Burke and his madam--the purtiest gal I ever did see, east or west. Hurray for her father and mother: there they are, with old squire an' the Major's mother. And there's Mr. Clive, all alone by himself 'cos his leg's stiff wi' the rheumatics; but he would come to see the deed done, which I may be wrong, but the new King George'll make him a live lord afore he's much older. Open your mouth, Tummas, an' if you hee-haw loud enough, I'll draw you another pint for nothing."

Desmond, now a Major, had returned home in company with Clive. During the three years that had passed since he witnessed the sailing of the *Jane* he had seen much service. He had been with Colonel Forde when that fine soldier expelled the French from the Northern Sirkars. He was with the same officer when he thrashed the Dutch at Biderra. He had been in close touch with Clive when these successful operations were planned; and the nearer he saw him, the more he admired the great man's courage in taking risks, promptitude in dealing with sudden emergencies, sagacity in seeing to the heart of a difficult situation. Thus, during those years, he gained much knowledge of the science of war, and much experience in dealing with men. He became rich also, not by questionable means, but by reaping the legitimate rewards of good and faithful service.

Before leaving India, Desmond learnt of changes that had happened at home. His brother had been thrown by a young and mettlesome horse, and so badly trampled that he must remain a helpless invalid for the rest of his life. Sir Willoughby Stokes, even before he learnt of the death of his nephew Peloti, had

made Desmond his heir. Mr. Merriman had bought an estate near his father's old friend, and settled down to the life of a country gentleman. A year after his return, Job Grinsell, the landlord of the *Four Alls*, had been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment for poaching, and Mr. Merriman had no difficulty in persuading Sir Philip Chetwode to let his inn to Bulger.

After an interview with Mr. Merriman, Desmond found the courage to put to Phyllis the question which he had not ventured to ask before she left India. What the answer was may be inferred from the fact that Sir Willoughby insisted on the wedding taking place at once. It was time for the return of his old enemy the gout, he said; he was going to Buxton to end his days, and wished to see the Hall in the hands of his heir before he left. Mr. Burslem, Desmond's old schoolmaster, performed the ceremony, and Clive, though suffering from rheumatism, came down for the occasion. The only familiar form that Desmond missed was that of old Dickon, who had died a few months after Desmond's departure from home.

Desmond settled down for a time at the Hall, cheering his mother's declining years, repaying good for ill to his invalid brother, and winning golden opinions from all his neighbours high and low. He eagerly watched the further career of his old hero, now Lord Clive; learnt to admire him as statesman as well as soldier; sympathized with him through all the attacks made upon him, and mourned him sincerely when, in 1774, the great man, preyed upon by an insidious disease, died by his own hand. Five years later he felt the East calling, bought a commission, and sailed with General Sir Eyre Coote, to take part in the "frantic military exploits," as some one called them, of Warren Hastings against Haidar Ali and Tippu in Mysore. He came home a Colonel, and was made a baronet for his services in the war. Finally retiring from public life, he lived for thirty years longer on his estate, happy in the careers of his two sons, who became soldiers like himself. He died, an old man, in the year after Waterloo, at which his eldest grandson, a lieutenant in the Guards, behaved with a gallantry that attracted the notice of the Iron Duke.

Visitors to Sir Desmond Burke's house were amused and interested to see a battered wooden stump with an iron hook hanging in a conspicuous place in the hall, amid tigers' heads, Indian weapons, and other trophies from the East.

"That?" Sir Desmond would say, in answer to their question. "That belonged to one of the best friends I ever had, a fine old salt named William Bulger. I met him when I was sixteen, and buried him when I was forty: and my wife and I have felt ever since a blank in our lives. If you can put up with an old man's stories, I'll tell you something of what Bulger and I went through together, when I was a youngster with Clive in India."

THE END.

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Uniform Edition of the Stories of
HERBERT STRANG

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Harry Rochester stands unrivalled amongst stories for boys as a living presentment of a stirring period of English history. It creates anew the glamour of the eighteenth century, and many of the great personages of the time cross its pages. Harry's ambition is to carry the Queen's colours, but his father being a poor country parson, and commissions selling high, he sees no prospect of attaining it. Nothing daunted, however, he takes whatever means offer to carve out a career for himself. As assistant to a Dutch merchant responsible for victualling certain of the Allied troops, Harry is brought into contact with the army in Flanders, and with Marlborough himself; and, later, his desire for a military career finds an outlet with the army of Prince Eugene, under whom he fights at Blenheim.

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Humphrey Bold: His Chances and Mischances by Land and Sea. A Story of the Time of Benbow. Illustrated by W. H. MARGETSON.

In this book, one of Mr. Herbert Strang's best-known historical romances, are recounted the adventures of Humphrey Bold from the time when he was a puny slip of a boy attending Shrewsbury School, the butt of his companions, who chaffed him for being Bold by name and timid by nature, until he had grown into a sturdy young giant, and sailed into Plymouth Sound as First Lieutenant of the Bristol frigate. The intervening chapters tell of Humphrey's service at sea under Admiral Benbow, his capture by the French and his escape from prison, and of the many exciting events that befell him in the West Indies.

"So felicitous is he in imparting local colour to his narrative that whilst reading it we have found ourselves thinking of Thackeray. This suggests a standard by which very few writers of boys' books will bear being judged. The majority of them are content to provide their young friends with mere reading. Herbert Strang offers them literature."--*Glasgow Herald.*

Rob the Ranger: A Story of the Fight for Canada. Illustrated by W. H. MARGETSON.

"Rob the Ranger," which has been placed by General Baden-Powell first among the great scouting stories, brings out the romantic side of the fight for Canada. Rob Somers, son of an English settler in New York State, sets out with Lone Pete, a trapper, in pursuit of an Indian raiding party which has destroyed his home and carried off his younger brother. He is captured and taken to Quebec, where he finds his brother in strange circumstances, and escapes in dead of winter, in company with a little band of New Englanders. They are pursued over snow and ice, and in a log-hut beside Lake Champlain maintain a desperate struggle against a large force of French, Indians, and half-breeds, ultimately reaching Fort Edward in safety.

"If there had ever been the least doubt as to Mr. Strang's pre-eminence as a writer of boys' books, it would be very effectually banished by this work of his."--*Glasgow Herald.*

Palm Tree Island: A Romance of the South Seas. Illustrated by ARCHIBALD WEBB and ALAN WRIGHT.

In this story two boys are left on a volcanic island in the South Seas, destitute of everything but their clothes. The story relates how they provided themselves

with food and shelter, with tools and weapons; how they fought with wild dogs and sea monsters; and how, when they have settled down to a comfortable life under the shadow of the volcano, their peace is disturbed by the advent of savages and a crew of mutinous Englishmen. The savages are driven away; the mutineers are subdued through the boys' ingenuity; and they ultimately sail away in a vessel of their own construction. In no other book has the author more admirably blended amusement with instruction.

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Settlers and Scouts: A Story of Pioneering in East Africa. Illustrated by T. C. DUGDALE.

The scene of this story is laid in the Highlands of British East Africa, and the book gives a vivid and accurately-drawn picture of the dangers and hardships that even in these days await the pioneer in the more remote parts of the British Empire. It also furnishes a good deal of information respecting the country and the people amid which the story moves. An Englishman and his son emigrate thither and settle down as farmers and stock-raisers; and the difficulties they encounter, first through the depredations of wild beasts, and afterwards owing to the hostility of an Arab chief and his followers engaged in the ivory trade, prove in the highest degree their courage and resource.

"Mr. Strang, as behoves such a favourite as he, provides plenty of adventure and excitement, but he gives much practical information as well, and his books may be recommended to any reader who wishes to learn what chance there is for a white settler in Uganda or to study the state of affairs at the Congo."--*Daily Mail.*

Boys of the Light Brigade: A Story of the Peninsular War. Illustrated by W. RAINEY.

This book opens in the streets of Salamanca with Lieutenant Jack Lumsden of the 95th Rifles endeavouring to keep the peace between some of his own Riflemen and the Spaniards. His harangue in fluent Spanish is overheard by Sir John Moore, who recognises in the young officer just the man he wants for his purpose, and sends him off upon a mission of some delicacy. Thence onward, Lumsden's adventures are interwoven with the history of Moore's gallant army

in the Peninsula, culminating in the great retreat and the Battle of Corunna.

"Of all the qualities that go to make up a perfect boys' book we know of none that is wanting in 'Boys of the Light Brigade,'"--*Glasgow Herald.*

Kobo: A Story of the Far East. Illustrated by W. RAINEY.

This book recounts the adventures of a young British engineer during the opening phases of the Russo-Japanese War. Bob Fawcett is sent to the Far East on behalf of his firm, which has supplied range-finding instruments to the Japanese Navy. His arrival coinciding with the outbreak of war leads, by a natural sequence of events, to his being an eye-witness of the first great sea fights by which Japan revealed herself to the world as a first-rate naval power; and the grim struggle between East and West is an ever-present background to the stirring story of his subsequent adventures amongst Cossacks and Manchu brigands, and of his friendship with Kobo, an officer of the Japanese Secret Service.

"An excellent story, such as one might expect to have from the author of that capital book, 'Tom Burnaby.' 'With a Japanese duty comes inexorably first.' This, indeed, is the keynote of the whole story. This principle of action dominates Bob's friend, and it dominates the story."--*Spectator.*

"The book is capital: full of life and vigour and local colour.... Mr. Strang has intimate personal knowledge of the countries of which he writes, which, no doubt, accounts for much of the *vraisemblance* of his story."--*Guardian.*

Jack Brown in China: A Story of the Russo-Japanese War. (Originally published under the title of "Brown of Moukden.") Illustrated by W. RAINEY.

This book describes the adventures of a young Englishman in Manchuria during the latter stages of the Russo-Japanese War. Mr. Brown, senior, a merchant of Moukden, is wrongly convicted by the Russian authorities of giving information to the Japanese, and is deported from the city. Jack does not know where his father has been sent, but he goes through some desperate adventures in his attempts to find out, and to get his wrongs redressed. At one time he is in imminent danger of being beheaded as a "foreign devil" in an outlying village, but is delivered in the nick of time by a band of brigands; and he has more than a passing glimpse of actual warfare. There is humour as well as excitement in the book, and some of Mr. Strang's orientals are very entertaining characters.

"The equal of anything we know of in the whole range of juvenile fiction.... The book will hold boy readers spellbound."--*Church Times.*

Samba: A Story of the Congo. Illustrated by W. RAINEY.

The scene of this story is laid in the Congo Free State, where a young Englishman and his uncle, while prospecting for gold, are brought into violent contact with the Belgians who are working the rubber concessions. Moved to indignation by the sight of the barbarous methods employed to extort rubber from the natives, the hero openly champions the cause of the oppressed; he gathers about him a small force, to which he imparts a measure of military discipline, and with it administers a sharp lesson to the slave-drivers. He restores the confidence of the natives in the White Man; to them he is Lokolobolo, a great chief, and a harbinger of brighter days.

"It was an excellent idea on the part of Mr. Herbert Strang to write a story about the treatment of the natives in the Congo Free State.... Mr. Strang has a big following among English boys, and anything he chooses to write is sure to receive their appreciative attention."--*Standard.*

"Mr. Herbert Strang has written not a few admirable books for boys, but none likely to make a more profound impression than his new story of this year."--*Scotsman.*

The Adventures of Dick Trevanion: A Story of 1804. Illustrated by W. RAINEY.

This is a romance of the early years of the nineteenth century. In it the old smuggling days are made to live again, and reverberations are heard of the war with Napoleon. The Trevanions are a Cornish family, whose fortunes have fallen low through the working out of their tin mines, and the scheming of a relative who bears a grudge against the head of the house. Dick, after many exciting events in which he is involved with smugglers and French privateers, makes a happy discovery, through which the prosperity of his family is restored.

"Mr. Herbert Strang has been well called the 'Twentieth-Century Marryat.' His many books stand high up on the list of boys' favourites. and among his new books for this year none is likely to be more welcome than 'The Adventures of Dick Trevanion.' The story is dated in the early years of the nineteenth century, and Dick's adventures on land and sea are so vividly depicted by Mr. Strang that it would not be surprising to find the book in the hands of older readers with a taste for adventure."--*Gentlewoman.*

With Drake on the Spanish Main: Illustrated by ARCHIBALD WEBB.

A rousing story of adventure by sea and land. The hero, Dennis Hazelrig,

is cast ashore on an island in the Spanish Main, the sole survivor of a band of adventurers from Plymouth. He lives for some time with no companion but a spider monkey, but by a series of remarkable incidents he gathers about him a numerous band of escaped slaves and prisoners, English, French and native; captures a Spanish fort; fights a Spanish galleon; meets Francis Drake, and accompanies him in his famous adventures on the Isthmus of Panama; and finally reaches England the possessor of much treasure.

"Mr. Herbert Strang bids fair to become to the present what the late G. A. Henty was to the past generation of young folk; in fact, his stirring romances, though, like Henty's, worked up on a sound historical basis, are far better written."--*The Lady.*

"Another of Mr. Herbert Strang's masterful stories of adventure and romance."--*School Guardian.*

The Air Patrol: A Story of the North-West Frontier. Illustrated by CYRUS CUNEO.

In this book Mr. Strang looks ahead to a time when there is a great Mongolian Empire whose army sweeps down on to the North-West Frontier of India. His two heroes luckily have an aeroplane, and with the help of a few Pathan miners, they hold a pass in the Hindu Kush against a swarm of Mongols, long enough to prevent the cutting of the communications of the Indian army operating in Afghanistan.

"An exceptionally good book, written moreover in excellent style."--*Times.*

"The 'Air Patrol' is really a masterpiece."--*Morning Post.*

Barclay of the Guides: A Story of the Indian Mutiny. Illustrated in Colour by W. KOEKKOEK. With Maps.

Of all our native Indian regiments the Guides have probably the most glorious traditions. They were among the few who remained true to their salt during the trying days of the great Mutiny, vying in gallantry and devotion with our best British regiments. The story tells how James Barclay, after a strange career in Afghanistan, becomes associated with this famous regiment, and, though young in years, bears a man's part in the great march to Delhi, the capture of the royal city, and the suppression of the Mutiny.

"Mr. Strang has been truly described as 'a born teacher of history,' and this story of the Indian Mutiny is an additional proof of the truth of the observation."--*Schoolmistress.*

Complete List of Stories for Boys by HERBERT STRANG

ADVENTURES OF DICK TREVANION, THE
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KOBO
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ONE OF CLIVE'S HEROES
PALM TREE ISLAND
ROB THE RANGER
ROUND THE WORLD IN SEVEN DAYS
SAMBA
SETTLERS AND SCOUTS
SULTAN JIM
SWIFT AND SURE

THOUSAND MILES AN HOUR, A
THROUGH THE ENEMY'S LINES
TOM BURNABY
TOM WILLOUGHBY'S SCOUTS
TRUE AS STEEL
WINNING HIS NAME
WITH DRAKE ON THE SPANISH MAIN
WITH HAIG ON THE SOMME
YOUNG JACK

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ONE OF CLIVE'S HEROES ***

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